

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA

25

DEITY OF DEMISE

[illegible]





▶▶▶ **ACCEL** • **WORLD** ²⁵

DEITY OF DEMISE

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**



"Cooperate with us or lose all your points right here, of course."

DEITY OF DEMISE, TEZCATLIPOCA

Super-class Enemy that appeared from inside the Sun God Inti.

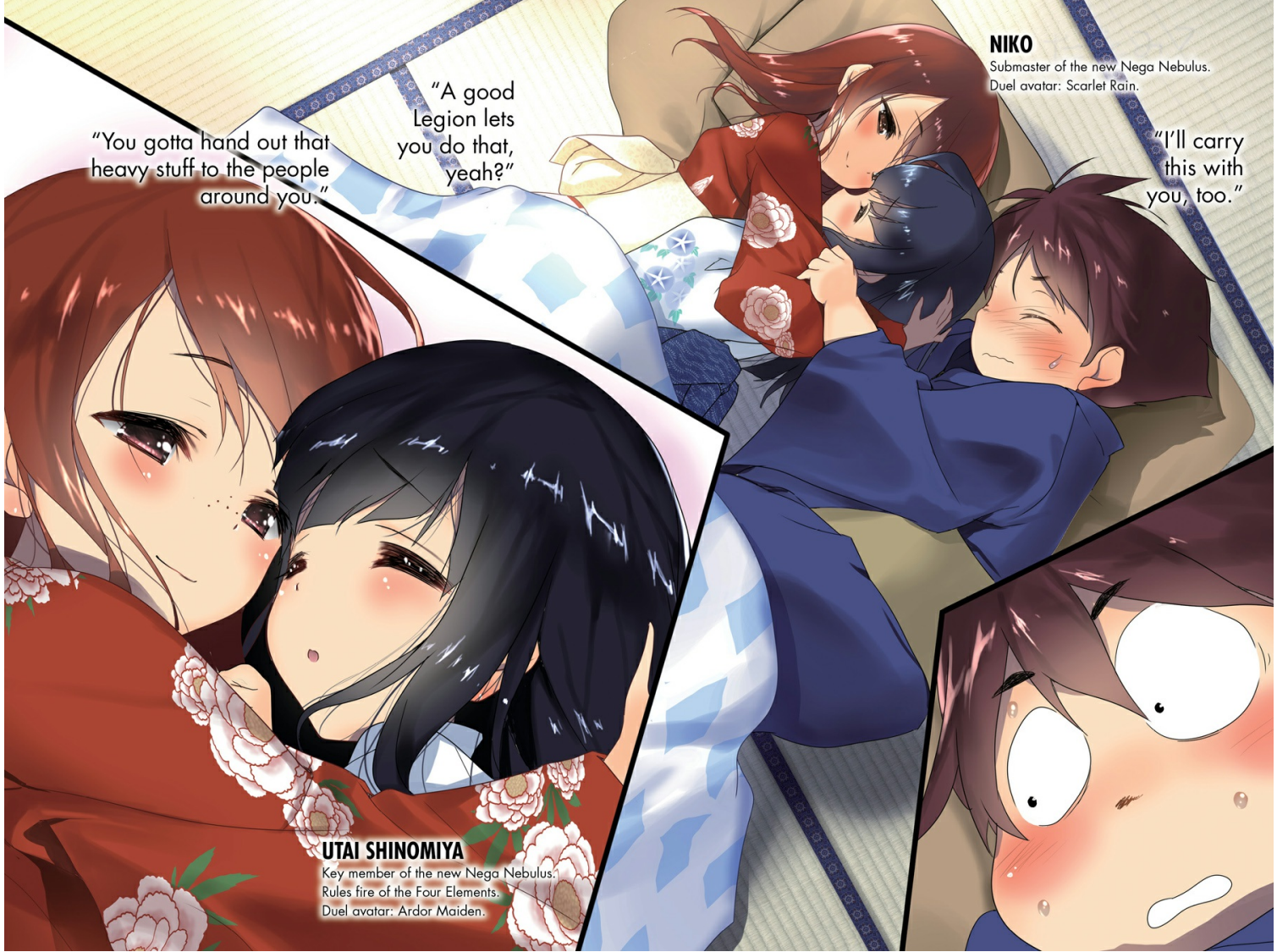
"What are you going to do to me?"

TRANSIENT ETERNITY, WHITE COSMOS

White King, Legion Master of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe.

SILVER CROW

Member of the new Nega Nebulus. Possesses the sole flying ability in the Accelerated World. Real world: Haruyuki Arita.



"You gotta hand out that heavy stuff to the people around you."

"A good Legion lets you do that, yeah?"

NIKO
Submaster of the new Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.

"I'll carry this with you, too."

UTAI SHINOMIYA
Key member of the new Nega Nebulus.
Rules fire of the Four Elements.
Duel avatar: Ardor Maiden.





"I do not wish
to be apart from
you any longer!"

"Do you have
any idea
how lonely I
was during
these ten
years I spent
recuperating?!"

METATRON

True form of the archangel who lives in the deepest
level of Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth, one of
the four Great Dungeons in the Accelerated World.
Treats Silver Crow like her servant.

Duel avatar and Enemy list

Legions of Pure Color

Black Legion: Nega Nebulus

Master: Black Lotus (Kuroyukihime)

Submaster: Scarlet Rain (Yuniko Kozuki)

Executive branch name: Four Elements

Wind: Sky Raker (Fuko Kurasaki)

Fire: Ardor Maiden (Utai Shinomiya)

Water: Aqua Current (Akira Himi)

Lime Bell (Chiyuri Kurashima)

Cyan Pile (Takumu Mayuzumi)

Silver Crow (Haruyuki Arita)

Chocolat Puppeter (Shihoko Nago)

Mint Mitten (Satomi Mito)

Plum Flipper (Yume Yuruki)

Magenta Scissor (Rui Odagiri)

Trilead Tetroxide

Executive branch name: Triplex

No. 1: Blood Leopard (Mihaya Kakei)

No. 2: Cassis Moose

No. 3: Thistle Porcupine

Blaze Heart

Peach Parasol

Ochre Prison

Mustard Salticid

Ash Roller (Rin Kusakabe)

Bush Utan

Olive Grab

Temporarily
transferred from
Great Wall

Blue Legion: Leonids

Master: Blue Knight

Executive branch name: Dualis

Cobalt Blade (Koto Takanouchi)

Manganese Blade (Yuki Takanouchi)

Frost Horn

Tourmaline Shell

Green Legion: Great Wall

Master: Green Grandé

Executive branch name: Six Armors

First seat: Graphite Edge

Second seat: Viridian Decurion

Third seat: Iron Pound

Fourth seat: Lignum Vitae

Fifth seat: Suntan Chafer

Sixth seat: ???

Jade Jailer

Yellow Legion: Crypt Cosmic Circus

Master: Yellow Radio

Lemon Pierette

Sax Loader

Purple Legion: Aurora Oval

Master: Purple Thorn

Executive branch name: ???

Aster Vine

White Legion: Oscillatory Universe

Master: White Cosmos

Executive branch name: Seven Dwarves

No. 1: Platinum Cavalier

No. 2: Snow Fairy

No. 3: Rose Milady

No. 4: Ivory Tower

No. 5: ???

No. 6: Cypress Reaper

No. 7: Glacier Behemoth

Shadow Cloaker

Other Legions

Acceleration Research Society

Black Vise

Argon Array

Dusk Taker (Seiji Nomi)

Rust Jigsaw

Sulfur Pot

Wolfram Cerberus (Armor of Catastrophe Mark II)

Computation and Martial Arts Research Club

Aluminum Valkyrie (Chiaki Chigira)

Orange Raptor (Yuko Hori)

Violet Dancer (Kurumi Kuruma)

Iris Alice (Lilya Usachova)

Affiliation unknown

Avocado Avoider

Nickel Doll

Sand Duct

Crimson Kingbolt

Lagoon Dolphin (Ruka Asato)

Coral Merrow (Mana Itosu)

Orchid Oracle (Megumi Wakamiya)

Tin Writer

Centaurea Sentry (Seri Suzukawa)

Enemies

Four Divines

Archangel Metatron (Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth)

Amaterasu (Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth)

???

???

Four Gods of the Four Gates

East gate: Seiryu

West gate: Byakko

South gate: Suzaku

North gate: Genbu

Eight Gods of the Shrine of the Eight Divines

???

Sealed Enemies

Goddess Nyx (Yoyogi Park Underground Labyrinth)

▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD** 25

DEITY OF DEMISE

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 25

REKI KAWAHARA

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■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level six).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level five).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level six).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

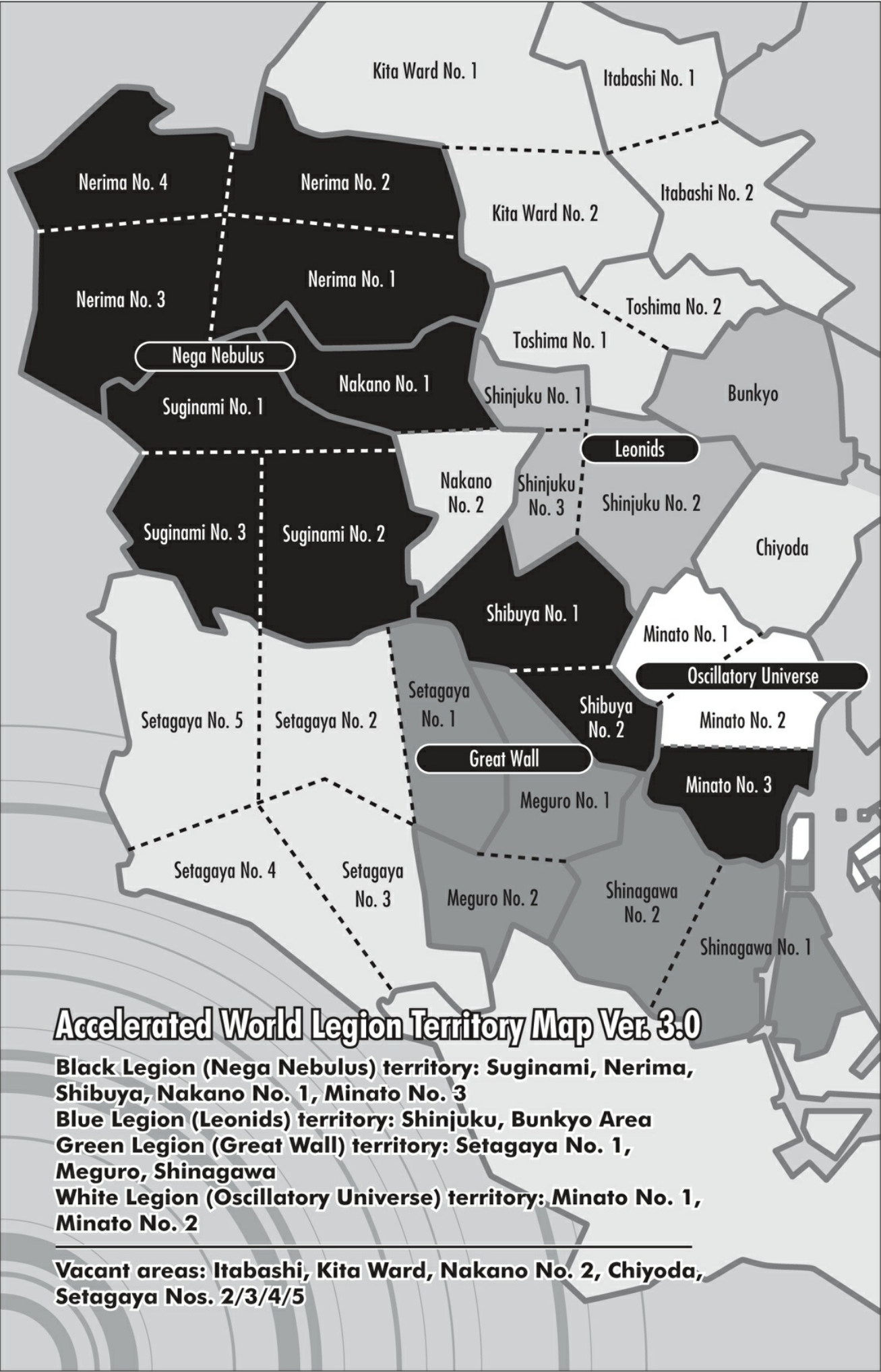
■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

- Normal Duel Field = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.
 - Unlimited Neutral Field = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.
-

- Movement Control System = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.
 - Image Control System = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.
 - Incarnate System = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.
-

- Acceleration Research Society = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.
- Armor of Catastrophe = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.
- Star Caster = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.
- ISS kit = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to access the Incarnate System. When the kit is used, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.



“It is unfortunate that we have to say good-bye so soon after being reunited. Good-bye, my friends. Good-bye, my beloved child. You performed your roles wonderfully, right up until the end.”

The White King, White Cosmos, sounded almost plaintive as she spoke from the back of Pegasus in the night sky, as though she truly did regret their parting. As the horse rhythmically flapped its wings, she gently raised her silver scepter, the Arc Luminary. The staff glittered as it caught the pure rays of light bathing the Moonlight stage.

A second later, it sliced down smoothly, as if cutting through the red threads of fate.

Circles of crimson light rippled upward from the palm of the nearby giant—some hundred meters tall—that looked down upon the Burst Linkers on the ground. The Super-class Enemy, the Deity of Demise, Tezcatlipoca.

That crimson light was the sign of an imminent attack. Haruyuki was certain the force of it would far surpass any technique he had thus far witnessed in the Accelerated World, but there was no way he was going to be able to dodge it. He was held in place by the powerful gravitational waves that rippled out from the dark circles above Tezcatlipoca’s other hand to mercilessly press down on the Inti attack team, a union of the six Great Legions.

As he listened to the sound of his own armor cracking, Haruyuki turned his mind to a place meters ahead of where he lay pinned. He and his companions weren’t the only ones Tezcatlipoca’s red rings were targeting. Five Burst Linkers had materialized mere seconds earlier in Kitanomaru Park adjacent to the Castle where the Nippon Budokan had once stood: the Purple King, Empress Voltage, Purple Thorn; the Yellow King, Radioactive Disturber, Yellow Radio; the

Blue King, Vanquish, Blue Knight; the Green King, Invulnerable, Green Grandé. And the Black King, World End, Black Lotus.

Having previously been killed on impact in the Inti drop, a suicide mission on the part of White Legion chief officer Ivory Tower, aka Black Vise, the five kings had at last managed to regenerate, thanks to the Inti attack team, the combined might of the five Legions. But this, too, was all part of White Cosmos's plan: After Haruyuki cut Inti's ball of flames open with his Omega style Whole Blade, the White King had appeared out of nowhere to take control of what emerged—Tezcatlipoca—with the Luminary's Divine Light ability.

The kings had been informed by messengers from their Legions that the Inti mission had been a success and thus had appeared in the field, believing that all danger had been eliminated, so they could not have anticipated materializing in the middle of this. Even so, given their long experience in battle, the level niners shouldn't have taken more than half a second to grasp the danger of the situation and readied themselves to take some kind of action.

And yet, they stood in a group in the center of the Budokan crater, motionless.

They couldn't move. The absolute force pressing the ninety-six members of the attack team to the ground—Tezcatlipoca's gravitational waves—also held the kings. When Haruyuki looked closely, he could see black circles at their feet, the same as the one beneath him, although he couldn't see it, given that he was on his belly on the ground.

He expected nothing less of the Kings of Pure Color than for them to be able to stay on their feet without bending at the knee under the pressure of this unparalleled force, but even the power-types like Blue Knight and Green Grandé apparently had their limits. He could hear the squealing of the kings' joints and the cracking of their armor mixed in with the heavy rumble of the giant.

While Tezcatlipoca rendered a hundred Burst Linkers powerless with its right hand, it brought up a shining red circle and then another in its left. Although the black rings in its right hand numbered five, there were already seven of the red rings, and he didn't know what it meant, if anything, to continue charging even

farther. At any rate, once it activated this attack, the five kings and Haruyuki and everyone else would be killed instantly—six kings, actually, since the Red King, Scarlet Rain, was also a member of the attack team.

Although he and his comrades had succeeded in their mission to destroy the Sun God Inti, all the kings and key personnel of the six Great Legions would fall into a new Unlimited EK.

“No...! You can’t...!”

Haruyuki heard a cry from his right. It was Nega Nebulus Submaster Sky Raker. She was clutching the wheels of her wheelchair with both hands and trying her best to stay upright, but the slender silver rims were cruelly crushed, unable to withstand the load.

The instant he heard the squeal of the spokes snapping, Haruyuki understood what Raker was afraid of.

It wasn’t the fact that the Six Kings would fall into another Unlimited EK. The Deity of Demise was under the control of the White King, which meant there was a very good possibility that the spoils of any battle involving the giant would also belong to her. If Haruyuki and the others were killed, they would only have however many points taken from them, but it was different for Niko, Kuroyukihime, and the other kings. All level niners were bound by the most ruthless rule in the Accelerated World: the rule of sudden death. If they were killed by another level-nine Burst Linker, they would lose all their points in that moment and have Brain Burst forcibly uninstalled.

In other words, when Tezcatlipoca carried out its attack, Blue Knight, Purple Thorn, Yellow Radio, Green Grandé, Kuroyukihime, and Niko would stop being Burst Linkers. They would lose their memories of the Accelerated World, the bonds they’d formed in it, and even the duel avatars that were the other halves of their own selves.

“No...No!!” Haruyuki squeezed out a cracked voice from beneath his mirrored mask.

No. Stop. You have to stop.

He looked up at White Cosmos hovering far, far above and prayed

desperately. But the White King's hand, holding the lowered Luminary, didn't so much as twitch. She was about to send the kings she'd fought alongside since the dawn of the Accelerated World to total point loss, together with her own child, Kuroyukihime, but she appeared as aloof and removed as ever.

This—*this* was likely the White King's aim. When she appeared there riding Pegasus with the first of the Seven Dwarves, Platinum Cavalier, she'd said, "All the necessary cards are laid out here." Meaning the Deity of Demise and the Six Kings.

She'd had a chance to wipe out the kings before. If she had used the Luminary for the Inti drop instead of giving it to Black Vise, she would have pushed all the kings, except for Niko, into sudden death rather than Unlimited EK. The reason she hadn't done this was so that she could maneuver the combined forces of the six Great Legions to destroy Inti when it had been impossible for the White Legion to do this alone. And to control Inti's second form, Tezcatlipoca, once it emerged, followed by total point loss for the kings. In so doing, White Cosmos would be able to reach the uncharted territory of level ten, finally clearing the impossible hurdle of defeating five level niners.

But even that was not her final goal.

The pinnacle of Enemies, Tezcatlipoca. The pinnacle of Burst Linkers, level ten. And the essence of negative incarnate power, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. By lining up these three ultimate powers of the Accelerated World, Cosmos was clearly attempting to accomplish something very particular, something that Rose Milady had called the great mission of the White Legion.

Whatever it was, Haruyuki couldn't let it happen. There was no way he could accept any "great mission" that was built on the sacrifice of Kuroyukihime, Niko, and the other kings.

His perceptions accelerated to the point where his brain—no, his quantum thought circuits—threatened to burn up, while the number of red rings increased again to become eight. An instinct with no base in reason told him that the next one would be the last.

The idea of calling on his most powerful protector, the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron, for help did cross his mind. She was currently in total

shutdown at Fufuan on the very top of the old Tokyo Tower to recuperate from her injuries. He could wake her, though, if he called to her through their link, but then she would be facing off against a more powerful Super-class Enemy at less than full capacity. And even Metatron couldn't cross the nearly four kilometers between here and the old Tokyo Tower in mere seconds. He couldn't rely on her or anyone else. He had to do something himself.

Here.

If he couldn't stand up right here and now, then his becoming a Burst Linker, reaching level six, the many trials he'd faced—all of it would have been for nothing.

“Unh...Aah...Aaaaaaaaah!!” he yelled.

But pressed down by the immense gravity, his avatar didn't so much as twitch. He couldn't get up, or spread the wings on his back, or turn his hand toward Tezcatlipoca. He was even using the Incarnate System already, but his invisible shackles remained as strong as ever.

If the dark, blood-red giant really was categorized as a Super-class Enemy doing the bidding of the White King, then it was indeed an absolute in the Accelerated World. A super Being perhaps even more powerful than the Four Gods of which the Anomaly, Graphite Edge, had once said, “You can't beat them if you don't go beyond the system.”

Beyond...the system.

This thought called up a faint voice from his memory.

So then, if the sights we see are produced by the system, this creates space for interference.

That was what his swordmaster, Centaurea “Ruthless” Sentry, had told him. The day he'd started training at her player home, Oumutei, Sentry had revealed the secret of Omega style. She had disappeared, almost melted away from his field of view as he faced her, and had severed Silver Crow's shoulder armor. At that time, Haruyuki hadn't even realized he'd been cut until the chunk of armor fell at his feet.

Sentry explained to his stunned self exactly what had happened.

During battle, the system anticipates a moment into the future and shows us that image. This future prediction is frightfully accurate, and there are no mistakes as a general rule. Because the system is making these predictions based on our thoughts—the signals that transmit the Image Control System.

The key here is, if you can understand the mechanism of this future prediction, it is possible to deliberately make it miss the mark.

Sentry had been talking about how the BB system produced the images that filled the players' fields of view, but the movement of Enemies was also part of the BB system. A top-level Enemy that reacted with incredible speed to a Burst Linker's attack wouldn't be using that future prediction.

Tezcatlipoca was currently targeting a full one hundred and one Burst Linkers. Haruyuki could tell that the waves were no simple range attack but instead restrained each individual target separately through the black circles that appeared at their avatars' feet. If he could remove that circle for a mere instant, if instead of lashing out with force, he could cause a future prediction error and make the system erroneously view Haruyuki as not there...

Even after his four months of training at Oumutei, he hadn't been able to unlock the secrets of Omega style. But all the techniques Sentry had shown him, everything she'd said to him, was burned into the back of his mind.

Rather than thinking you will not move, you fill your mind with nothing. Erase oneself and become one with the world—this is the truth of the Omega style's deepest art, Gou.

Could he really erase even his unconscious mind in this situation, in the middle of an absolute crisis when he was facing the end of everything? Especially when he was worse than anything at controlling his own nerves?

Although it had been nine months since he'd become a Burst Linker, his heart practically leapt out of his mouth before a normal duel, not to mention before the Territories, and he stuttered and stammered awkwardly when talking to a Burst Linker he was meeting for the first time. Rose Milady, aka Tsubomi Koshika, had praised him by saying he was such an ace Linker that there wasn't a person in the Accelerated World who didn't know who he was, but he was absolutely nothing of the sort. He had only managed to survive this long

because he'd been blessed with teachers, friends, and friendly rivals. If he'd been fighting on his own, he was sure he would've been at a total point loss in the blink of an eye.

But. Even so.

With Niko and Kuroyukihime facing more and more certain death, he definitely, absolutely, most certainly could not use his own weakness as an excuse to give up. He had to think, think so hard that his maximally accelerated spirit burned up.

Centaurea Sentry had said that Gou, the deepest art of Omega style, used the same Image Control System as an Incarnate technique, but that the way it used this was the opposite of an Incarnate technique. It completely erased the image output from the quantum circuits and became one with the world.

Niko, the second Red King, Scarlet Rain, had once told him about a similar logic: Zero Fill. When a Burst Linker fell captive to intense despair and helplessness, the orders they gave their duel avatar were erased by negative Incarnate, and the Burst Linker was unable to move. Haruyuki himself had lost his will to fight in the middle of a battle with Dusk Taker and very nearly ended up in Zero Fill himself.

But Gou and Zero Fill were only similar on the surface. What zeroed out in Zero Fill was the command to move your avatar when a large amount of negative Incarnate was output from the quantum circuits—the spirit. In order to achieve Gou, you had to completely erase the signals transmitting to the Image Control System. It was neither positive nor negative Incarnate, but a “null” Incarnate.

How was he supposed to achieve that? The key was probably what Sentry had explained as “becoming one with the world.” By expanding his mind to the entirety of the vast, boundless Accelerated World, his imagination would be infinitely diluted. He would have an image of the infinite.

Up to that point, his activity in the Accelerated World had essentially been confined to the areas between Suginami and Chiyoda in central Tokyo. Normally, it would have been impossible for him to imagine the whole of the Accelerated World stretching from Hokkaido to Okinawa.

But he had seen the whole of this world a few times in the past. Not from the Lowest Level of the normal duel field nor the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field, but from the Highest Level. In that information space, where countless nodes shone like the Milky Way, there existed not only Brain Burst 2039, where Haruyuki and his comrades existed, but also the already defunct trial No. 1, Accel Assault 2038, and trial No. 3, Cosmos Corrupt 2040, laid upon each other. That was the entirety of the Accelerated World.

He had to imagine it: The triple world spreading out without bounds. Even just for a second...Eliminate all the anxiety, frustration, and fear in his heart and melt into the world. But he couldn't accidentally go to the Highest Level. He wasn't trying to focus his mind on an infinitesimal point and break through the wall of the world; he was scattering himself into the farthest reaches and disappearing from the system. From the northernmost node in the BB world to the southernmost...And from the AA world above his head to the CC world spreading out below his feet...

Imagine.

Gou.

Haruyuki saw the world ripple like waves. Those waves swallowed the avatar of Silver Crow, broke it into particles, and melted them into the air and the earth.

Of course, this wasn't physically happening; Haruyuki and the BB system were only feeling it. The world wasn't coming to him through his eyes, but rather his brain—his soul. From the Castle and the government buildings of Kasumigaseki all around him, the skyscrapers of Shinjuku and Shibuya, and all of the twenty-three wards, to the entirety of the Kanto Plain, Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku, Kyushu...and even farther to the two Accelerated Worlds overlaid on the world of BB...

Wait. Is this...?

His ever-expanding consciousness was suddenly yanked back into his avatar.

He had been melting into the world for less than half of half a second. But that was enough. Tezcatlipoca's gravity attack had lost its target for a mere instant, and the pressure pushing down on Haruyuki's body weakened. It wasn't

enough for him to stand. But it was enough for him to move an arm.

He lifted his right hand, covered in cracked armor, and pulled it back as far as he could. He set in the tips of his extended fingers the image of light.

His Incarnate technique, Laser Javelin, had the greatest range of Silver Crow's long-distance attacks, but he needed both hands for the launch move, so he couldn't use it now, and it didn't have the greatest accuracy. His second most far-reaching attack, Laser Lance, would reach about thirty meters, but Tezcatlipoca's head was a hundred meters up, and even the hand emitting the gravity waves was fifty meters above him. Plus, if his attack did actually hit its target, it would have been like being tickled by a gentle breeze for a Super-class Enemy. He needed to come up with a completely new technique to have even the slightest effect in a situation like this.

All of his attack-type Incarnate techniques, including Laser Sword, the first one he'd learned, were in the range expansion category. By holding in mind a strong image of his hand as a sword or a lance of light, he could overwrite and do damage to a target beyond the reach of his bare hands. The reason he used the image of a blade rather than a gun for a long-distance technique was because his duel avatar was specialized in a single power.

Before the big takedown of Dusk Taker, Niko had coached Haruyuki and Takumu on the Incarnate System. After demonstrating her range-expanding Radiant Beat and her movement-expanding Pyro Planing, she had told them, *"Scarlet Rain's long-distance flame power's like the spines on a hedgehog. Inside all that, I'm just a weakling of a little kid with no power at all. Which is why I can't use my will to enhance the attack or defensive power of the main body of this avatar. This right here is the absolute limit of the Incarnate System."*

Haruyuki personally believed that his avatar, Silver Crow, was the manifestation of the trauma that led him to wish he were anywhere but where he was. Because he was a pure speed type with nearly all his potential poured into his flight ability and no weapons other than his fists and feet, he'd been convinced that he could only learn range and movement expansion of the four basic types of Incarnate techniques—that he couldn't use Incarnate techniques to enhance his attack or defense power.

But was that really true?

According to the Mental-Scar Shell theory of Argon Array, a key member of the Acceleration Research Society, those people encased in shells so thick and hard that they couldn't see into the mental trauma that formed the mold for their avatars wound up becoming metal colors. He didn't intend to accept everything Argon said wholesale, but if this logic was correct, then it meant that he also didn't know what was really inside of Silver Crow's metal armor.

What if.

What if there was something inside of his avatar besides the desire to flee?

When she was explaining the second stage of Incarnate techniques to him a month earlier, Kuroyukihime, his parent and the master to whom he had sworn his sword, had told him, *"To generate a positive will, the process of inverting mental scars is absolutely essential. You face head-on your own trauma, shaped into the form of a duel avatar. You accept it, and you sublimate it into an image of hope. This is no easy feat. But you should be able to do it. You realized all on your own what the image is, after all."*

Haruyuki had replied to her words with excitement, *"I'll try. I'll fight, I'll find it. My image of hope."*

In the subsequent Castle rescue mission, he had generated the second-stage Incarnate technique Light Speed by inverting his mental scars in order to shake off the fierce pursuit of the God Suzaku. But what if there was something other than a scar inside of Silver Crow right from the start, a hope that didn't need to be inverted?

The armor of metal color avatars was a mental shell to protect the self from something so painful the person couldn't look directly at it—Argon Array's assertion wasn't wrong. But was that really the whole story? Were metal colors born with greater defensive power than green-type avatars simply to protect themselves?

Chrome Falcon, one of the Originators and the metal color who became the first Chrome Disaster, only ever thought about protecting his partner, Saffron Blossom. When he succeeded in the unprecedented feat of breaking into the Castle and had the opportunity to take for himself either the longsword Infinity,

a powerful weapon, or the full-body armor Destiny, a powerful defensive item, Falcon chose the armor to complement Saffron where she was weak rather than selecting the sword that would have made him stronger. In the end, he had fallen into the dark side of Incarnate only because the scheming of the Acceleration Research Society had pushed Saffron to total point loss before his eyes. In Chrome Falcon's leaden gray armor, there was definitely the desire to protect the people important to him.

Haruyuki had the same feeling inside his own heart. Actually, at some point along the way, his desire to protect himself had shrunk in the face of his growing desire to keep his comrades safe—not only Kuroyukihime and the members of Nega Nebulus, but also the many Burst Linkers he'd become friends with along the way.

Naturally, the majority of the Legion members and his rivals were stronger than he was. The truth was, the times when he was protected far outnumbered those when he was doing the protecting. But even so, all he wanted right now was to protect them, protect Kuroyukihime and Niko, of course, but also the other kings and the comrades who had given everything to this fight. He wanted to protect all one hundred of them from being killed by Tezcatlipoca.

He felt something hot filling his avatar. Not flames of rage that threatened to burn him up, but the energy of a peaceful, pure light. It didn't feel newly born, but rather like something that had lived deep inside him all this time.

Yes: A light had lived in Silver Crow's hard armor from the time of its birth. The fact that his initial special attack, Head Butt, dealt light damage was proof of that.

The light inside me...Please protect everyone!!

Praying with enough intensity to rend his soul asunder, Haruyuki focused this light in his raised right hand and let it ride on his imagination.

"Light Shell!!"

By now, his deception of the system using Gou was fading away, and he was about to be pinned to the ground by Tezcatlipoca's gravitational wave attack once more. But the sphere of light that spread out soundlessly from his hand pushed back the super gravity shaking the air itself. The shining white shell was

so thin that he could see through it to the outside, and yet it expanded without any friction whatsoever. It grew to ten meters, then twenty, and approached the five kings standing frozen in the center of the Budokan crater.

A little farther, just a little more, and his light would reach Kuroyukihime.

“Nngh...G...oooooooooooo...”

He stretched his hand out as far as it would go, and the figure of Black Lotus in the distance blurred before him. The load on his mind—his quantum circuits—was growing too large, hindering his faculties. But he couldn’t let his Incarnate stop now. He had to sever the gravity that bound the kings and create a chance for them to escape before Tezcatlipoca activated the attack in its left hand. Otherwise, both his Gou and his Light Shell would have been in vain.

The blurry world before him started to fade to black, and his other senses grew distant. Even still, he continued to squeeze out this image with everything he had left. Just a little farther, three more meters, two...

But there, the overlay in Silver Crow’s hand blinked and flickered and disappeared, and the shell of light shattered like impossibly thin glass, transforming into countless tiny particles and scattering.

And thus, the ninth crimson circle appeared in Tezcatlipoca’s left hand. The rings began to emit a dazzling light, and the energy there, already incredible, suddenly grew more concentrated, shaking the world itself. The time of the end had come.



But then light came streaming from behind Haruyuki on both sides, light of all colors: blue, red, yellow, green, purple light effects. Overlays.

It hadn't been in vain. He'd only been able to hold the shell of light for a mere second, but his comrades had not wasted that time. Before the gravitational waves could assault them again, they called out the names of countless techniques in clear voices.

"Lightning Cyan Spike!!"

"Searing Note!!"

"Limonene Solvent!!"

"Icilin Strike!!"

"Charged Vine!!"

"Rocket Straight!!"

"Carnage Cannonball!!"

"Superluminal Stroke!!"

"Rangeless Scission!!"

"Spiral!!"

"Wind Bullet!!"

"Radiant Burst!!"

"Heavenly Stratus!!"

Those were about the only individual cries that Haruyuki could make out, but there had to have been at least fifty other voices shouting out at the same time. A rainbow of long-distance special attacks and Incarnate techniques shot up from the ground and raced across the night sky.

It wasn't their reaction speed that was worthy of rapt admiration, attacks launching the instant the gravitational waves disappeared. No, it was the fact that, despite not having been able to confer with each other and coordinate their attack, the main force of the six Great Legions had all taken aim at the same target. Not Tezcatlipoca's hands or face, but the White King sitting on her

mount, hovering just a little behind the giant's head.

Given her excessively slender appearance, she couldn't have had any significant defensive power, even if she was a level niner. If she were hit with fifty simultaneous special attacks and Incarnate techniques, there was no way she would have been able to live through it. As if to offer evidence for this, Platinum Cavalier, holding the reins behind Cosmos, reached for the kite shield under his cloak that sat on his back.

But he was already too late. And even if he wasn't, this wasn't the kind of attack that a single shield could completely defend against.

White Cosmos had also judged this to be the case and yanked up the Luminary. In response, Tezcatlipoca moved with a speed that was out of place with its massive bulk. It raised its left hand, the blow that would end everything still hovering above its palm, and intercepted the rainbow bundle of long-distance techniques.

A flash of light.

A moment later, an astonishing explosion dyed the night sky red. The Burst Linkers' special attacks and Incarnate techniques combined to detonate the tremendous energy charge in Tezcatlipoca's left hand. A half-second later, a shock wave rocked the stage and made even Haruyuki's armor squeal.

The giant's enormous body lurched to one side. Haruyuki was about to reflexively call out a warning, but the Enemy threw its arm out to the side and took a step back, stopping the fall. Haruyuki would have liked to check how much damage the creature had taken, but the health gauge was displayed above its head a hundred meters up. It was impossible to see how many levels it had from the ground.

They hadn't been able to knock it down, but when it moved its right hand to keep its balance, the gravitational wave attack had disappeared.

I have to take advantage of this chance, Haruyuki thought, but his head still wasn't working properly, lingering aftereffects of having pushed his imagination too hard.

Suddenly, someone yanked him up.

“Crow, leave the rest to us!” Takumu shouted. Holding Haruyuki firmly with his normal arm, he brandished the Pile Driver of his right high in the air.

The other Burst Linkers also started to move as one, without waiting for commands. The fifty-odd fighters with long-distance attacks got into formation as they readied their next simultaneous attack. The remaining close-range types split into two groups and flew out front. It was a wonderfully coordinated action, but there was something more important than Tezcatlipoca at the moment. After being showered in the gravitational waves at extremely close range, the five kings in the center of the Budokan crater appeared unable to move, all of their armor horribly damaged, even that of the Green King.

“We have to...protect them!” Haruyuki squeezed out a hoarse voice and tried to take a step toward the crater.

“Bro!!” someone shouted from the middle of the long-range group. The pitch of their voice was bittersweet and high—the Yellow Legion’s Lemon Pierrette?

The Yellow King stood to the rear of the five kings, as if hiding, and spread out his abnormally long and slender arms, pulling Blue Knight and Purple Thorn to his right side and Green Grandé and Black Lotus to his left as he cried out the name of a technique. “Clown’s Last Resort!!”

A bright yellow light radiated from his entire body. This was no mere visual effect, but an Incarnate overlay. The light instantly turned into an odious smoke. There was a *poof!* and the figures of the five kings vanished.

And then yellow smoke puffed up from the center of the joint team to Haruyuki’s right. The night wind blew it away to reveal the five kings standing there.

“Teleportation?!” Takumu gasped.

It was no wonder he was astounded. In the fighting game that was Brain Burst, teleportation was much too strong a power, and as far as Haruyuki knew, Chrome Falcon’s Flash Blink was the sole teleportation technique. But even that was a pseudo teleportation in that it actually transformed the duel avatar into particles and moved them in a straight line at super-high speeds. When he’d become the sixth Chrome Disaster, Haruyuki had rampaged with this very Flash Blink, and the only thing that had been able to stop him was Hexahedral

Compression, the special attack of Acceleration Research Society vice president Black Vise. To think that the Yellow King, who appeared least suited of all the kings to fighting, second only to the White King, would have such a powerful technique!

The place where the kings materialized was nearly fifty meters from the center of the crater. If Yellow Radio could teleport over that kind of distance, then couldn't he have whisked them all away when Inti destroyed Vise's confinement technique, Icosahedral Insulation, by dropping from the sky?

This question flitted through Haruyuki's mind, but now was not the time for that. They had succeeded in defending the kings as a group, but they still weren't out of the woods.

Resisting the urge to run over to the injured Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki looked up at the night sky. Tezcatlipoca's massive body was still listing to one side, motionless. The afterimage of the explosion at last faded, and the left hand that had defended against the combined attacks emerged from the smoke.

Except for its thumb, the hand of the giant was essentially destroyed—which meant that some percentage of the force of the attacks had pierced the hand. In which case, the White King wouldn't have been uninjured. In fact, there was a possibility that she had died, together with Platinum Cavalier.

As he considered this, Haruyuki stared intently into the night sky, and then a quiet commotion rose around him.

A pentagon rose against the snowy white moon, bathed in golden light. A shield—Platinum Cavalier's kite shield. But it was too big. The shield hid not only Cavalier and the White King but even most of Pegasus.

Without a sound, the kite shield contracted, revealing the two Burst Linkers sitting on the back of Pegasus. They were too far away for him to make out any details, but it appeared that they hadn't taken any major damage.

"...Damned Bashful. So he's had a technique like that all this time?" the Blue Legion's Manganese Blade muttered from his left. It seemed that this was her first time seeing this shield enlargement technique, even though she had fought Platinum Cavalier any number of times.

“But Tezcatlipoca’s left hand was smashed. It shouldn’t be able to do that annihilation technique now,” Cobalt Blade responded, from her place next to Manganese.

Ahead of them, Ardor Maiden looked back for just a second. “The gravity attack alone is a grave threat. We have to prepare so that we’ll be able to destroy it immediately if it makes any move to use its right hand.”

“True...We can’t have Crow shielding us every single time,” Manganese Blade said, and gently patted Haruyuki’s back.

He wanted to say he would shield them however many times it took, but all the strength had left his body; he couldn’t even move his mouth. If Takumu hadn’t been holding him up, he would have collapsed in a heap on the ground. He had the thought that it would be completely impossible for him to deploy Light Shell even one more time, and then told himself that if he had to, he would try to as many times as it took.

A shiver of tension raced through the Burst Linkers in the area. Tezcatlipoca had started to move. But it merely righted its inclined body and lowered its crushed left hand before stopping once more. Platinum Cavalier and the White King in the night sky were also stationary. The only things moving on the battlefield were the gently flapping wings of Pegasus.

“Wonderful.”

It was an impossibly innocent sound, smooth and sweet. This was the voice of Transient Eternity, White Cosmos. As if truly impressed, she continued, holding the Arc to her chest with both hands:

“Incredible that you would destroy in an instant Tezcatlipoca’s Toxcatl, something the fiercest warriors in history have not been able to resist.”

Haruyuki furrowed his brow skeptically. Tezcatlipoca had appeared from inside the Sun God Inti, which had never once been defeated since the dawn of the Accelerated World. In other words, no Burst Linker, including the White King herself, had ever encountered this Enemy before. And yet the way she spoke made it sound as though a group of high rankers had fought it before.

And why did the White King have such thorough knowledge of the Deity of

Demise, Tezcatlipoca, anyway, from its proper name to its techniques? Where had she gotten the information that this giant would appear if Inti was defeated, something that not even the Blue or Green Kings—Originators themselves—or the Saints Metatron and Amaterasu, knew? He wondered at it all while Takumu propped him up.

“I seriously doubt you have the time for such observations now, Cosmos.”

The voice that rose from his right was sharp and ready to fight, albeit with an exhausted edge. The Black King, Black Lotus—Kuroyukihime—raised the sword of her right hand, its edge only slightly nicked, and pointed the tip squarely at the White King.

“No matter how strong this enormous monster is, you can’t believe that we would be caught up in that same attack once more. If we destroy its right hand as well and seal away the gravitational wave attack, the rest is just the usual Enemy hunting. However great its HP, if it can be damaged, then it’s a far easier challenge than Inti. It might take some time, but we *will* defeat it. And I have no intention of letting you or Cavalier get away!”

The White King appeared not the least bit ruffled by this ferocious speech from her own child and real-life younger sister, Kuroyukihime. “Always charging in without proper preparation is a bad habit of yours, Lotus. You can’t honestly believe that Inti’s so-called second form would be easier to subdue than Inti itself? The Sun God could be tamed with just one of the Luminary’s circlets, but this child needed six, hmm?”

Indeed, crowns to control Tezcatlipoca were embedded in its head, wrists, chest, stomach, and hips. Put simply, this would imply that the difficulty in taming it was six times greater than in taming Inti. But if he looked at it another way, this also meant that it was possible to tame even a Super-class Enemy if the crowns hit in just the right places.

The instant this thought occurred to him, Haruyuki felt something catch fire in the center of his mind. The question he’d had a few minutes earlier popped back to life. What was White Cosmos trying to do by assembling the three ultimate powers of the Accelerated World?

It had to be the Castle. Defeat the invincible Gods who guarded the four

gates; destroy the Eight Divines, the world's most powerful Enemies in the basement of the Castle's main building; and obtain the final Arc, the Fluctuating Light. *That* was the ultimate objective for all Burst Linkers. In which case...

Haruyuki put a hand on Takumu's shoulder and summoned the meager energy he'd managed to recover to pull himself up. "White King!!"

In the distant sky above, Cosmos turned her face ever so slightly. Eye lenses colored with curiosity looked straight through him.

Bracing his legs to keep them from shaking, he yanked the words up from the bottom of his soul. "White King, if your power extends to even Super-class Enemies...then if you had the cooperation of everyone here, you could control even the Four Gods of the Castle! Why can't you take that road? Instead of this path of blood, why can't you choose to combine forces with all the Legions to take on the final mission?!"

The White King was for Kuroyukihime, and for Haruyuki himself now, their most powerful and almost unforgivable enemy. And yet, he couldn't keep himself from belting out the thought to her.

Even after the lengthy echoes of his scream of a question had disappeared, no one moved to say anything.

Breaking the silence colored by the dim white of the moonlight was the almost whispered response of the White King: "So strange, hmm?"

She continued before he could wonder what exactly was strange.

"Long, long ago...in a totally different virtual world, a very similar situation occurred. A large number of players came together in the world, pressed with the choice of working together to clear the game or kill each other before they could be betrayed. There was a player who spoke up idealistically like you, Silver Crow. And there was no doubt that more than a few people took those words to heart. But in the end..." She closed her mouth and shook her head slightly.

Haruyuki felt the aura enveloping the pure white avatar change instantly. From the utterly and entirely pure, saintly aura to an absolute zero that could freeze everything.

“It’s too late. Everything, it’s all too late.”

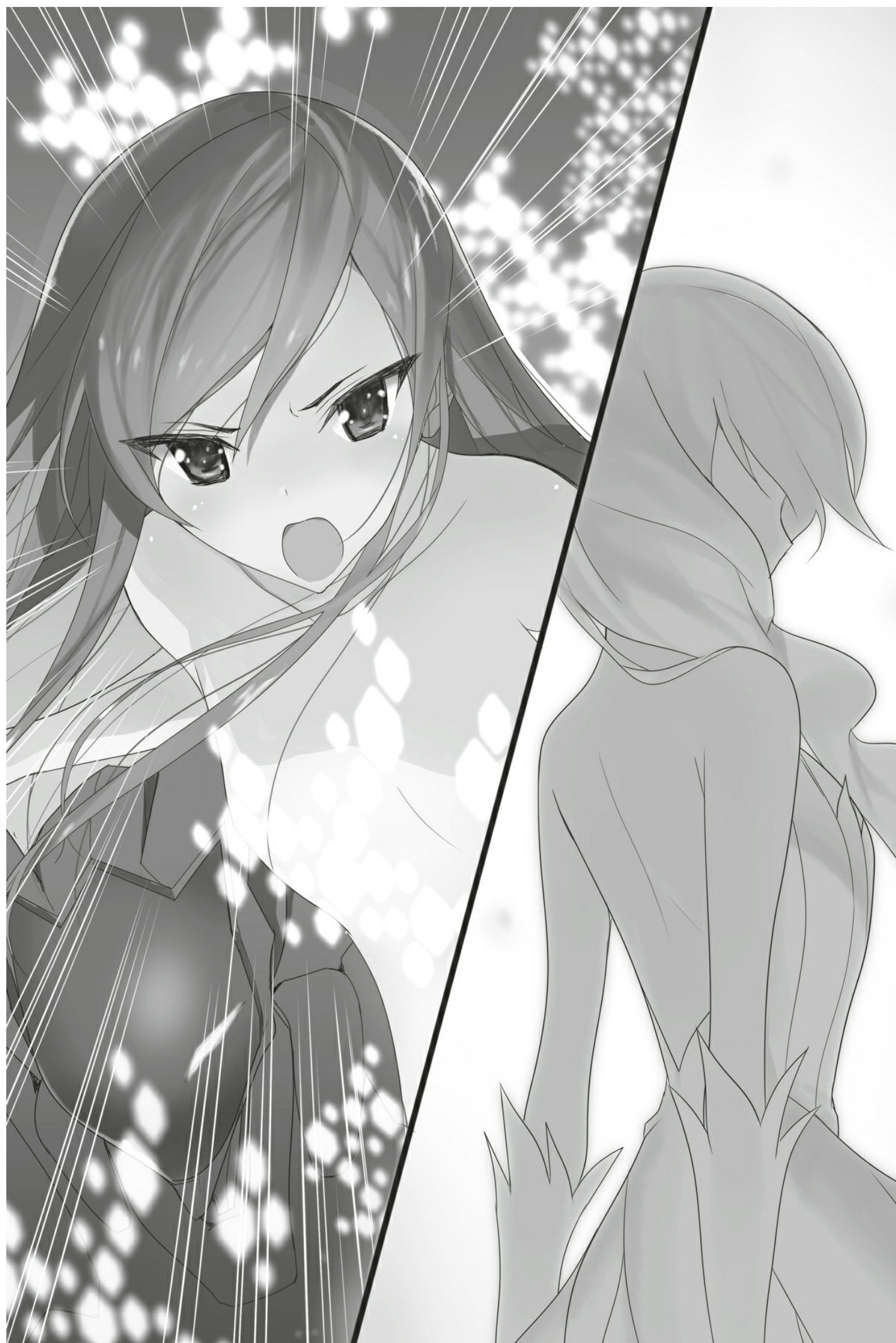
The sudden biting chill of her tone froze the core of his body. Takumu’s avatar, pressed up against his, also stiffened.

Breaking the paralysis of the overwhelmed Burst Linkers was the roar of Kuroyukihime, as though she were unleashing the fire of her heart: *“In that case, this is the final stop for you!”*

Skreenk! Together with a metallic squeal, a bluish-purple overlay jetted from the body of the Black King. The other kings also produced auras of varying colors, and this heat instantly spread to the surrounding Burst Linkers.

We have no choice but to fight. To stop this series of tragedies, Haruyuki vowed in his heart and then clenched his hand into a fist. He was still largely powerless, but he figured he had enough left in him to launch at least one Incarnate blow.

He knew what had to be done. Now that Tezcatlipoca’s left hand was destroyed, the biggest remaining threat was the gravitational wave attack of the right hand. When that hand, currently facing straight down, moved to reveal the palm, they would beat it back with multiple full-strength attacks. Even if the giant was six times stronger than Inti, if it could be damaged, then it made sense that they would be able to defeat it at some point, just like Kuroyukihime said.



The sky above the battlefield crackled and shook as though electrified. Perhaps called by the one hundred and one auras, black clouds rolled into the night sky, twisting like living creatures.

But the White King did not move.

Was she waiting for their focus to break? But most of the Burst Linkers on the ground there were high rankers well versed in the Incarnate System. If it was a matter of simply maintaining the image, they could likely keep going for an hour or two. They could also have a messenger leave through the portal while they were glaring at their foes, and call for reinforcements.

And Pegasus, which Cosmos and Cavalier were riding, couldn't fly forever. Silver Crow's flight ability used up his special-attack gauge, so he wouldn't have been surprised if there was also a limit on the flying time of the winged horse. Once they descended to the earth, the close-range avatars could join the battle. He couldn't imagine that prolonging a stalemate now would be to the White King's advantage.

And then he suddenly felt the ground beneath his feet shake faintly. He wondered briefly if the intense fighting spirit of the Burst Linkers had shaken even the field itself, but he quickly banished the idea. He could hear a ponderous sound like something heavy moving. From the right and the left, from ahead and behind. It was...

"Enemies," he murmured.

"Dammit!" Manganese Blade hissed. "I'd thought they wouldn't pop up for the time being, given the sheer number wiped out in Inti's destruction. Guess I was too optimistic."

Incarnate techniques were a siren song for Enemies. It wasn't as though Haruyuki had forgotten this piece of common knowledge. But it was just as Manganese said: They had only just used normal attacks to defeat the more than twenty large Enemies who had been called by the Incarnate techniques they'd used to destroy Inti. He figured that all the Enemies around Kitanomaru Park had been exterminated and wouldn't recover until the next Change. But apparently, the multiple Incarnate attacks that had destroyed Tezcatlipoca's left hand had been too powerful and drawn in Enemies from even farther afield.

And now, large Enemies in the Wild and Beast classes would close in from all directions, and he and his comrades would no longer be able to focus solely on Tezcatlipoca. But they had no guarantee they would be able to destroy the right hand as they had the left when the palm was turned away from them.

“Enemies should also target a tamed Enemy,” Sky Raker pointed out from behind Haruyuki. She stepped up from her half-destroyed wheelchair and called a green aura into her readied hands.

Given that Kuroyukihime called Raker a user of pure positive Incarnate, Haruyuki had thought all her Incarnate techniques focused on range defenses, like Wind Veil and Swirl Sway, but when they had attacked Tezcatlipoca’s left hand, she had used a powerful attack-expansion Incarnate technique called Wind Bullet.

When users of first-quadrant Incarnate techniques—in other words, positive power with range as its target—made use of the fourth quadrant, negative power with range as the target, it generated an excessive mental burden. Utai, with her purification powers, was as specialized as Fuko in positive Incarnate, if not more so. When she unveiled her terrifying Incarnate technique, which drowned enemies in a bog of magma and burned them up, the burden had been so great that she dropped into a coma. But Fuko sounded fresh and alive, no hint of exhaustion in her voice.

“And top-level Enemies won’t simply target the nearest foe; they’ll start with the foe they feel is the greatest threat. If several Beast-class Enemies turn on Tezcatlipoca, even the White King won’t be able to overlook that. We’ll just have to use that opening and destroy its right hand.”

“Good. That’s the plan, then,” the Blue King, Blue Knight, replied. Ready with one of the Seven Arcs in both hands, the greatsword Impulse, he glanced over at the Black King. “Lotus, you tell us when to go with the synchronized attack. You can read Cosmos’s movements better than anyone.”

“Understood,” Kuroyukihime agreed. The Green King hefted his shield, the Strife, up slightly, while the Purple King held her staff, the Tempest, up straight. The Yellow King twirled his magic baton, Rotary Rod, and the Red King drew her sidearm, Peace Maker.

The ground beneath their feet shook more and more intensely, basically an ongoing earthquake at this point. Haruyuki narrowed his eyes and made out several massive shadows—although nowhere near as big as Tezcatlipoca—advancing along the Castle’s moat.

Most likely, half of these Enemies would target him and his comrades. They would simply have to deal with this as they prepared to launch the attack on Tezcatlipoca as soon as Kuroyukihime gave the signal. Without anyone giving the order to, the close-range and defensive-type avatars began moving toward the outer edge of the group.

Would the Burst Linkers of the six Great Legions break ranks first, unable to handle the Enemy attacks? Or would the White King try to use the gravitational wave attack first, unable to ignore the damage to Tezcatlipoca? The answer to this would decide the result of this battle—and thus of the ongoing and protracted fight with the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society.

“Haru, can you stand on your own now?” Takumu whispered from beside him as quietly as possible.

“Yeah, thanks, Taku,” Haruyuki said. “I’m okay now.”

“Okay, I’ll go around to the defense, then. I should be more useful there. I’ve got nothing left in my gauge.” He had only a few minutes earlier used Lightning Cyan Spike in the general attack, but that technique devoured his gauge so he couldn’t fire it at random. His Incarnate technique, Cyan Blade, was powerful, but entirely close range, so unfortunately, Tezcatlipoca’s hand was far beyond its reach.

“Got it.” Haruyuki pulled away from his childhood friend and stood tall. He nearly staggered forward but managed to brace himself before taking the sheathed Lucid Blade from his hip. “Take this. I won’t be using it in this battle.”

He held the sword out hilt-first. Takumu started to protest and then closed his mouth. In his head, he knew that this was the optimal course of action. Haruyuki would either join the multi-pronged attack with his Laser Javelin or use his Light Shell again in the worst-case scenario; his sword would do him no good in this battle. But if Takumu was going to be joining the defense team, then he couldn’t use Cyan Blade. It might draw the attention of Enemies who

focused on Tezcatlipoca.

“Thanks,” Takumu said, as he accepted Lucid Blade and mounted it on his right hip. It was a slender weapon for Cyan Pile, who was larger than Silver Crow, but Takumu, of all people, would be able to handle an irregular two-handed style with the Pile Driver of his right arm and the sword in his left hand.

Haruyuki watched him run off to the edge of the group before he turned his mind back to Tezcatlipoca and the White King in the sky above. Takumu and the others would repel the Enemies. He believed that and waited for Kuroyukihime’s signal.

The shaking of the earth intensified with each millisecond. The flood of Enemies was already not even a hundred meters away. But the White King didn’t move. She maintained a mysterious silence, still holding the Luminary to her chest.

The Enemies split into two groups. One kept on straight at the Burst Linkers, while the other charged toward Tezcatlipoca’s feet. The Enemies and the defense team, and then the Enemies and Tezcatlipoca, made contact—and that was when an enormous shock rocked the world.

The White King whipped the Luminary down.

“Ready!!” Kuroyukihime shouted, knocking her right sword arm against her left. Haruyuki similarly dropped into a ready position and mustered up as much overlay as he could in both arms.

Tezcatlipoca raised its right hand and began to charge the gravitational wave attack that the White King had called “Toxcatl.”

But before the five black concentric rings arrived, the layered long-distance attack of the Six Kings and several dozen Burst Linkers destroyed the right hand —

Or it should have.

However:

A yellow circle rose not in either hand of the dark-red giant, but rather in the center of its chest.

A circle of the same color appeared at Haruyuki's feet.

"Corvus!!" Sky Raker cried.

"Crow!!" Manganese Blade shouted.

The two tried to grab his arms from either side, but their hands only slid down his metal armor. A sudden gravitational pull sucked Haruyuki up into the air.

"Whoa?!" he cried out, stunned, and tried to spread the wings on his back. But before he could, a massive hand—Tezcatlipoca's—came toward him with a howl and grabbed hold of him in midair.

Terrible pressure. The armor covering his body shrieked, and a large part of his health gauge was cut away.

Pushing aside the terror of being crushed to death, Haruyuki shouted, "Black Lotus!! Please fire!"

Even if he died there, he would only lose some points and regenerate in an hour. If they could destroy Tezcatlipoca's hand with just one death, it was a small price to pay. Kuroyukihime must've understood that.

However.

Through their invisible bond, he felt her hesitate for a mere fraction of a second.

Thus, the White King was the tiniest bit faster.

She brought the Luminary down so quickly it was invisible to the eye, and Tezcatlipoca crossed the right hand holding Haruyuki with the destroyed left hand. He almost didn't have time to register it as some kind of preparatory movement before a red circle that looked to be more than ten meters across appeared at the giant's feet.

Only seven or eight Beast-class Enemies were inside the circle; the Burst Linkers were farther out, safe. Even so, Haruyuki couldn't help but scream as if in agony, "Everyone! Defend!"

Crimson flames jetted up from beneath Tezcatlipoca's feet. The large Enemies must have had huge health gauges, and yet they burned up in an instant and turned to ash, shrieking in all kinds of horrific ways.

The power of this ranged attack...If close-range Burst Linkers had encircled Tezcatlipoca's feet instead of the Enemies, they would have all been completely annihilated in less than a second.

This guess that sent a shiver up Haruyuki's spine was, however, half-wrong.

His avatar was fixed firmly in place, and yet the gravitational pull changed. Tezcatlipoca's massive bulk was starting to ascend. The flames jetting from its feet weren't an attack, but a jet to achieve liftoff for the 100-meter-tall Super-class Enemy.

Suddenly, a roar like the ground giving in filled his ears. The propulsive flames grew increasingly intense. Smoke and waves of heat shimmered out, cut across the crater, and swallowed up the Burst Linkers. He saw several defense techniques light up before these, too, were enveloped by black smoke.

That was all Haruyuki could make out.

Tezcatlipoca shot up into the night sky like a rocket, and the ground grew distant in the blink of an eye. When he turned his head, he could see Pegasus racing ahead in the night sky. The White King had chosen to flee rather than fight.

But why? If the giant had enough power left that it could cause the instant deaths of nearly ten Beast-class Enemies with the surplus energy from takeoff, then even if its right hand was gone, couldn't it have kicked the Burst Linkers away?

Why didn't the White King do that? And why is she not killing me...

Haruyuki finally realized the position he was in. This was no time for relief that he was alive. It was possible that dying in Kitanomaru Park would have been better. Because he was currently being abducted.

He hurried to peer at the ground far below, but it was nothing but endless rows of the temple-like buildings particular to the Moonlight stage, and he couldn't immediately tell which direction they were flying in. But from the speed at which the landscape was rolling by, he could see at least that they were moving relatively fast. If they kept flying in a straight line like this, they would soon leave Tokyo.

What should he do? It would be a Herculean task to escape when his body was bound so firmly, and he couldn't attack the White King. If he could shoot lasers from his eyes like Argon Array...His thoughts inevitably drifted in this direction, and he desperately tried to focus.

What he needed to do at that moment was understand his current location and pinpoint with accuracy the place where Tezcatlipoca eventually landed. He should be able to do that. He'd been memorizing a map of the Tokyo environs ever since he became a Burst Linker.

Thus, Haruyuki swallowed his fear and stared at the field below with wide eyes.

In the end, Haruyuki's efforts to understand their route in detail turned out to be mostly meaningless.

Led by White Cosmos and her bodyguard, Platinum Cavalier, as they sat astride Pegasus, the Super-class Enemy Tezcatlipoca flew east from Kitanomaru Park, and then southeast. They flew over Ginza, Harumi, and Ariake, and when they came out on Tokyo Bay, their altitude steadily decreased until they finally landed at Tokyo Grand Castle, the large theme park that had opened the previous year on a massive artificial island in the southwest area formerly referred to as the central breakwater reclaimed land and currently known as Reiwa Island.

Haruyuki had never flown there, but he had seen any number of pictures and videos of the enormous Western-style castle rising up in the center of the area. Naturally, this was the Accelerated World, so it didn't look the same as in the real world, but the buildings of the Moonlight stage were all in the style of temples from some foreign land to begin with, so it still seemed fairly similar.

Crimson flames shooting from the soles of its feet, Tezcatlipoca descended in a straight line and came to land in the plaza in front of the fortress, causing the earth to shake. Grand Castle's citadel—he was pretty sure it was called Heimwert Castle—was about eighty meters high at its tallest tower, but Tezcatlipoca was still two heads taller.

Still gripped in the giant's right hand, Haruyuki twisted around as far as he could. He caught sight of Pegasus descending behind them to land on a balcony jutting out from the front of the castle. Platinum Cavalier slipped off its back first and then held out his right hand reverently. The White King's slender fingertips touched it as she came down gently to the ground.

He'd hoped the two of them would disappear inside the building, but naturally, that didn't happen. When the White King lightly waved the Luminary, Tezcatlipoca reached out the hand pressed to its chest and moved Haruyuki to the balcony, too.

It wasn't that he didn't consider fleeing at top-speed flight the instant the Enemy opened its hand. But he had no guarantee he'd be able to get away, and if the White King were so inclined, it was plenty possible for her to drop him into an Unlimited EK right then and there. Of course, Tokyo Grand Castle was the largest landmark in the city center, so there had to be a portal somewhere on the grounds, but he wouldn't have the luxury of going around looking for it.

Thus, when Tezcatlipoca loosened its grip, Haruyuki let his avatar slide out. His feet touched the marble tiles, but unable to get his legs under him properly, he kept going and fell on his backside.

"So you can't stand...," Platinum Cavalier said, in exactly the same languid tone as he'd used when Haruyuki first encountered him, as he stared down through a helmet with a handsome and very knightly design.

If Haruyuki agreed that, no, in fact, he couldn't stand, he very much doubted the other avatar would extend a hand to help him up, so he shook his head awkwardly. "Oh, I'm fine."

He was actually painfully aware of how he had overexerted himself, more than he ever had before, because he'd gone straight from four months of training at Oumutei into the Inti battle and then the fight against Tezcatlipoca. But as a member of the Black Legion, he couldn't exactly show that kind of weakness here and now. *I slept for an hour on Mei's lap! I can still move!* he told himself, and forced himself to his feet.

He did wobble briefly, but ignoring that, he stood up as tall as he could and looked at Cavalier and White Cosmos before him. "What are you going to do to me?"

It was not the knight who answered, but rather the saint in the white dress.

"Oh-ho, even more impatient than rumor would have it. So we jump straight to the conclusion. What would you do if I said total point loss or brainwashing or some such?"

“I’d...run away...” It was the only answer he had, so he gave it, and Cavalier patted the hilt of his sword.

“Then...should I cut off those wings now?”

“What?!” Haruyuki couldn’t tell if he was being serious, if this was an actual threat. Fortunately, the White King spoke again before he drew his sword.

“It’s all right. The boy won’t run. Because he can learn a secret here that he’s simply been dying to know.”

“A-a secret?” Haruyuki parroted.

“Yes.” The White King smiled. “The objective of Oscillatory Universe and the Acceleration Research Society. The truth of the Accelerated World, which not even Rose Milady, who left the Legion, knows.”

Perhaps because the two Burst Linkers before him were not radiating any kind of enmity, much less the information pressure associated with high rankers, he had relaxed just a little, letting his fatigue win out, but now he felt an icy dagger plunge into his soul.

The elegant avatar before him, so slender her armor looked as though it would crumble at a mere touch, had brought about countless tragedies in the Accelerated World. She had pushed Saffron Blossom to total point loss in an Unlimited EK, creating the trigger that had turned Chrome Falcon into the first Chrome Disaster. She’d given her child and real-life younger sister Kuroyukihime false information that had her send the previous Red King, Red Rider, to total point loss with a surprise attack. She’d distributed ISS kits throughout the Accelerated World, plunging dozens of Burst Linkers into the dark side of Incarnate. She’d abducted the second Red King, Scarlet Rain, and stolen her Enhanced Armament to produce the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. She had locked up Orchid Oracle, aka Megumi Wakamiya, in Tokyo Midtown Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field after treating her like a tool. And she had made Burst Linkers of the six Great Legions fight the Sun God Inti; tamed the Deity of Demise, Tezcatlipoca, when it appeared; and tried to push all Six Kings to total point loss in one go.

There was nothing that could justify all this suffering, this evil. Haruyuki had to tell her that he wasn’t interested and challenge the two of them to a fight

right then and there. Even if he couldn't actually put up a real fight, even if it meant losing. Even if he ended up incurring the wrath of the White King and being trapped in an Unlimited EK.

He silently clenched his hands into fists, and seeing this, White Cosmos smiled faintly once more.

"It wouldn't be too late to fly into a fury *after* you hear what I have to say, would it?"

"How can you prove you're telling the truth?" Haruyuki replied, his voice cracking. "How am I supposed to trust you, the same person who manipulated her own child with lies?"

Platinum Cavalier wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his sword. But the White King made a small gesture with her left hand, and he was motionless again, like a statue.

White Cosmos set the Luminary on her hip and sat down on the long white leather sofa in the middle of the balcony. She smoothly crossed her legs—this movement was startlingly reminiscent of Kuroyukihime—and looked up at Haruyuki standing stock-still before her.

"Hoh-hoh. Now that I think about it, that makes you my only grandchild, hmm, Silver Crow? Nothing unusual in the Accelerated World, but I do feel a certain emotion at the thought," she said, in that endlessly clear, soft, neutral tone.

"We're not related." Haruyuki shook his head fiercely. "The Black King no longer thinks of you as her parent, so there is no bond between you and me."

"Well, I suppose so," Cosmos assented easily, showing no signs of being put out. "We say parent and child, but the BB program we copy and install doesn't even include simple metadata, so unlike in the real world, we don't inherit any genetic information. That's why I made her a Burst Linker on a whim myself."

"...On a whim?"

The parent and child of the Accelerated World is not something as trivial as that!

He intently resisted the urge to shout this back at her. As Burst Linkers, he and the White King were just too different in terms of values, viewpoints, convictions, everything. The gulf between them was so wide and deep that he couldn't bridge it with even a thousand words.

Instead, he declared in a strained voice, "I knew I couldn't believe anything you said. And even if this 'truth' about the world you're going to tell me is, in fact, true, you would have zero reason to tell it to me."

"Well, if that's the case, then don't you think I had no reason to bring you here in the first place? If I'd been so inclined, I could have killed every one of the Burst Linkers back there. I was a teensy bit surprised that you destroyed Tezcatlipoca's hand, but for a monster like this, that doesn't even qualify as damage."

"...You're lying," Haruyuki muttered.

"Am I?" The White King raised a hand and pointed to the front of the balcony. "From here, you should be able to see its health gauge."

"..."

When he looked back awkwardly, the blood-colored giant was standing tall in the center of the plaza. The head was still nearly forty meters above the balcony, but he could just barely make out the gauge floating above it. The instant he noticed the number of levels...

"Whoa..."

Ten levels.

The Archangel Metatron, a Legend-class Enemy, had four. The Gods Suzaku and Seiryu, Super-class Enemies, had five, and this was double that. And only the first of these levels was just barely depleted, maybe one percent if he gave a generous estimate. The damage from repeated blows inflicted by not only the special attacks but also the Incarnate techniques of the elite of the six Great Legions wasn't even one percent of the entire ten-level gauge.

Haruyuki was at a loss for words.

"The Toxcatl of the right hand that you destroyed and the Miccailhuitontli

that launches from the left hand are merely basic techniques, which can be used without gauge loss.” The White King’s voice echoed quietly behind him. “Mere normal attacks, and they have that level of power. Our analysis determined that Tezcatlipoca’s general fighting power is greater than that of the Four Saints and the Four Gods combined.”

“ ... ”

His gut squelched the rising thought that this was impossible. Compared with the Four Saints and the Four Gods, the design was painfully simple—jointless arms and legs extending from a thick pillar of a torso, the head nothing more than a long ellipsoid—but it was precisely this that made him fear that it was an undeniably, indescribably foreign object, something outside the logic of the Accelerated World.

But if it was actually stronger than the Four Saints plus the Four Gods, then a new question popped into his mind. Two, in fact.

“Why would a thing like this exist?” Haruyuki forced his stiff body to turn around. “A game shouldn’t have a monster that can’t be defeated even if all the players worked together.”

The White King shrugged lightly as if she had anticipated the question. “That’s why it’s the god of the end. A devastator existing only to close the world. Crow, have you heard how the Accelerated World was created?”

“Y-yes, from Graphite Edge.” Holding back his animosity for the White King for the moment, Haruyuki told the mysterious tale carved into the deepest parts of his memory.

“Graph said that a long time ago, there was something like a war in a certain virtual world. Two forces fought about a Being locked in that world. One side was trying to free the Being, and the other side was trying to destroy it. At the end of the fighting, the two leaders reached the system console of this world at the same time. Leader A tried to destroy the Being with admin privileges, but that was impossible, so instead, they decided to lock it away forever somewhere no one could touch it. They built a dungeon like a massive fortress in the center of the world, sealed the Being in the very deepest part of it, and set eight guardian monsters as sentinels. The dungeon itself was protected by

four monsters to guard the gates. That dungeon is the Castle now, and the monsters that stand watch over it are the Eight Divines and the Four Gods.”

The White King nodded slowly. “And then?” she asked.

“And then?”

“There were two leaders, yes? What did this leader B of yours—well, Graph’s—do?”

“Um.” Haruyuki continued his recitation word for word: “They decided to entrust their hope to the future. To believe that at some point, warriors powerful enough to defeat the four gatekeeper monsters would come, penetrate the stronghold, take down the eight guardian monsters, and release the Being. That’s what Graph said.”

“I see. Is that so?”

Haruyuki watched the White King nod again and was suddenly rocked with the worry that he had blabbed some extremely important information that she didn’t know. But her aloof aura didn’t change in the slightest.

“For a veteran more senior than the Originators, he does know a fair bit, hmm?”

He definitely hadn’t expected her to say that. “More senior than the Originators?” Unable to process the meaning of this, he stared intently at the white face mask.

“Originators” was what the first one hundred players were called. The one hundred children given the BB program directly by the creator of Brain Burst 2039—leader B in the story. It was impossible for any player to be more senior than they were.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

She looked at him silently for a moment before a faint smile rose on her face. “We’re touching on a matter quite close to the heart of things. Might I continue, then? I thought you couldn’t trust me?”

“Aah.” Reflexively, he started to move his hands to cover his mouth but managed to hold back. He went back through his memory to find why they had

started talking about the Accelerated World in the first place and realized that it was because he'd been struck by the White King's talk of the "god of the end."

Tezcatlipoca was strong enough to completely destroy the balance of the game BB 2039 because this Enemy existed to close the world. There was a serious possibility that White Cosmos's explanation was a lie from start to finish, but he did want to know the rest. And the meaning of the ominous words "close the world."

"I'll decide if I believe you or not once I hear your story," Haruyuki replied, still aware that she was trying to manipulate him.

White Cosmos moved a hand without a word. Her slender fingers indicated an easy chair across from the long sofa where she sat. When Haruyuki hesitated to take a seat because Platinum Cavalier was still standing, the silent knight finally spoke.

"Well then...I shall return Arion to the stables."

When his master nodded lightly, he straddled Pegasus, on standby in a corner of the balcony, and flew off toward the rear of Heimwert Castle. Apparently, Cavalier had named the horse— Wait. That wasn't the important part here. What was important was that Tokyo Grand Castle appeared to have been transformed into the base of the White Legion in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

When he brought his gaze back, the White King still had her hand up, so he moved to the easy chair. He sat on the edge so that he could fly off immediately if anything happened, and then asked after a moment's hesitation, "Is it okay for your bodyguard to leave? I've heard that of all the Seven Kings, you're the worst at close-range fighting. What would you do if I attacked you?"

"Mmm. I suppose if you had a sword, I might be a little more on guard. But I would rip off your arms with my Incarnate before you could reach me with your bare hands. Although your head would work, too," the White King said casually as she leaned back into the sofa. The simple yet elegant crown on her head—the true form of the Arc Luminary—caught the moonlight and glittered coldly.

Haruyuki had lent Lucid Blade to Takumu, so he did indeed have nothing equipped at his hip. But even if he had brought the sword, he very much doubted that a slicing attack would reach her, or even that he would be able to

pull it from its scabbard. It was hard to immediately believe that she could rip off his arms or his head with just Incarnate power, but he didn't much feel like testing the truth of that statement.

"I-I'm sorry." He bowed his head and then asked again the question that had been interrupted before. "So you said Graph is a more veteran player than the Originators. What did you mean by that?"

"Hmm? Ohhh. He's an isotope."

"Huh? A-an isotope?" He gaped in blank incomprehension.

"Is that important?" She shrugged lightly. "Isn't there anything you actually *need* to know?"

He did think it was important, but it was true that in terms of priority, the reason for Tezcatlipoca's existence ranked higher.

"So then...tell me about the god of the end," he said, glancing up at the super-massive Enemy, motionless in the plaza to his right.

Cosmos nodded, uncrossed her legs, and placed her hands on top of her extremely thin, skirt-shaped armor as she sat up and looked at him. "All right. I'll tell you." Her voice was utterly unchanged in volume and tone, and yet it made him feel like the temperature had dropped just a little.

"The prehistory of the Accelerated World you mentioned, the tale of a hidden war and a sealed Being, is basically true. Unable to secure the release of the Being, leader B left that hope to the future—that is not incorrect. But the problem comes after that. A great deal of time passed following the war, and once the three trial games finally started operation, they won over a great number of children. Just as you love Brain Burst 2039, Silver Crow, many children loved the worlds of its predecessor, Accel Assault 2038, and its successor, Cosmos Corrupt 2040, and all the things that were born there."

The names of the two defunct games called up memories for Haruyuki. At the end of the previous month, after the extended fighting over five missions at the time of the Umesato Junior High School festival—the rescue of Aqua Current, the attack on Metatron's first form, the destruction of the ISS kit main body, the return of the abducted Red King, and the crushing of the Armor of Catastrophe,

Mark II—the White King had suddenly broken into Nega Nebulus’s accelerated meeting in a spectator dummy avatar, and said, *Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. The reason these two worlds died out...is that both of these worlds were too biased. AA was filled with excessive fighting...and CC with excessive harmony.* And thus they were destroyed. He still couldn’t understand what she’d meant.

“...When you jumped in at the Umesato festival, you said that the excessive harmony and cooperation of the CC world produced not acceleration, but stagnation. You said time stopped in the CC world and so it was destroyed.”

“You have quite a memory. I did indeed say that, and it is true.”

“Graph warned me not to take anything you say at face value, since most of your words are meant to manipulate people.”

“Oh dear, did he?” He sensed a wry smile beneath her face mask.

“But at the very least,” he continued, “it’s a fact that AA and CC are no longer in operation. Is that what the problem you mentioned is? That all the children who loved those worlds like we do this one had the game program forcibly uninstalled and lost their memories?”

“Hoh-hoh.” For some reason, White Cosmos laughed, and then slowly shook her head from side to side. The moonlight playing in her long, golden hair scattered snowy white particles in the air. “Your intuition is fairly decent, but unfortunately, this guess has missed the mark. The forcible uninstall and the erasure of memories is the greatest salvation for those who have lost all their points. Go on and picture it. You’re banished from this world, but you still have your memories and the BB program. And yet you cannot accelerate or duel ever again...You wouldn’t have that for anything, would you?”

Haruyuki was about to reflexively agree, but he clenched his teeth and swallowed the words. If he was only considering himself, she was right—maybe it would have been easier to lose all his memories along with the program. But in that moment, he would also forget the comrades he had fought alongside: Kuroyukihime, Takumu, Chiyuri, Fuko, Akira, Utai, Niko, Pard, Rin, Shihoko...and Metatron. When he imagined how they would feel, he couldn’t simply nod and smile here.

“That was a bit of a mean-spirited question, hmm?” A faint smile bled onto her face once more as she stared at him. “You wrestle with it terribly, but don’t reject it...I do believe, however, that if they could have made the choice themselves, the majority of those who have lost all their points would have agreed to have their memories erased. After all, along with your memories of the Accelerated World, you could erase even the mental trauma that was the mold for your duel avatar.”

“ ... ”

In the back of his mind, he saw the carefree smile of Dusk Taker/Seiji Nomi after losing the BB program. He had been driven by bottomless hatred and a lust for power, but now he seemed to be giving his everything to his studies and team practice, almost like whatever had possessed him had fallen away. The “marauder”-era Nomi definitely didn’t seem happier than the Nomi of now. But Centaurea Sentry/Seri Suzukawa, who had been revived from a state of total point loss through some means, had told Haruyuki, *“Ever since I stopped being a Burst Linker, I’ve carried this emptiness inside of me. Always trying to remember, never being able to...There was constantly this empty space inside of me that I could never seem to fill.”*

Did the White King know about this sensation that tortured the lost? Would she be able to insist, even with that, that the memory erasure was a total salvation?

“So then...” He took a deep breath and let it out before asking, “So then, why are you called the Necromancer? Why would you do something like call back those people who have been saved according to you—Dusk Taker, Red Rider, and even your own Legion member, Orchid Oracle? Why would you bring them back to the Accelerated World and inflict suffering on them again?”

He asked the question fully prepared to incur the wrath of the White King in so doing and have her cut off the conversation or even attack him with Incarnate. But the look on Cosmos’s face didn’t change in the slightest—although Haruyuki hadn’t been able to read her thoughts or feelings right from the start. She merely tilted her head very slightly to the left.

“First of all, allow me to correct a misapprehension you have. The nickname

Necromancer comes from my special attack 'Resurrect by Compassion.' Which merely shortens the regeneration wait time for avatars who have died in the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field. Naturally, it has no effect on Burst Linkers who have lost all their points."

"B-but before she summoned Dusk Taker, your subordinate, Argon Array, said something about how your Revive the Dead was not so nice and wondered about some deal with the devil..."

"Oh dear." Cosmos smiled more clearly than she had when he told her what Graphite Edge had said. "Argon never mends her chatty ways, no matter how many years pass. To get a real regeneration ability, a deal with the devil would be a small price to pay. After all, you've basically done the same thing, haven't you, Silver Crow?"

"Huh?"

"You contracted with the Archangel Metatron, yes? Even though I was the one who worked my fingers to the bone to drag it out of the Shiba Park dungeon."

"Th-that was to make her defend Tokyo Midtown Tower when you had the ISS kit main body, though!" he shouted, anger welling up at the White King for treating Metatron like a tool when she had the exact same intelligence and emotion as a human being.

And it wasn't just Metatron. White Cosmos and the Acceleration Research Society had used Wolfram Cerberus, a newbie Burst Linker they should have protected and guided, as a pawn, and turned him into a vessel for the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. In order to avoid hurting Haruyuki, Cerberus had even depleted his Burst Points until he had only ten left and tried to push himself to total point loss at Haruyuki's hand.

And it was Orchid Oracle, Rose Milady, Black Lotus. The White King betrayed the Burst Linkers who had trusted her one after the other, used them as tools, and then tossed them aside. He could never forgive that, no matter what the reason, no matter what the necessity.

"I didn't *contract* with her," Haruyuki said in a strangled voice, these thoughts in his heart. "We became friends. We help each other out because we're

friends. Is that so strange?”

“Not strange, no. I was only thinking that you’ll get hurt one day.” She shook her head. “Well, that’s fine. Anyway, the problem with the three trial games that I was talking about is not the fact that the players of Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt had their memories erased. It’s before that, it’s what happened when the games ended.”

“What...happened?” he repeated, holding the indignation that smoldered in him like a live ember.

Before Brain Burst, he had experienced the service shutdown of an online game he’d played several times. The reason was decreasing profits, so there were correspondingly fewer active players right before the end, and he loitered in the empty town plazas, listening to the countdown to server shutdown. He wondered if the same thing had happened in the two trial games.

The White King took her gaze off his expectant one and looked up at Tezcatlipoca, frozen in front of the castle, and narrowed her eyes slightly. He felt like some emotion flitted through those eye lenses that were pale peach and light blue and lavender all at the same time, but it quickly disappeared, leaving only the original detached light. She turned her face back to him and spoke.

“It took ten years for the person you—Graph—called leader B to get from making the template for the Accelerated World to actually beginning operation of the trial games. One reason was that they had to wait for the first consumer devices equipped with the soul translation technology, the Neurolinkers, to be released. And then they had to wait for the children born immediately after to grow up, to make use of the high affinity with the STLT they gained through having them equipped from right after they were born. The other main reason it took ten years was they had to wait for the AI that actually controls the games to reach a level of practical use.”

“Huh? AI?! An AI is the admin for Brain Burst?!” Haruyuki cried out, before remembering a conversation he’d had with his Legion comrades a while ago.

It had been a Sunday about ten days earlier, when he’d gone to a pool on the top floor of Shibuya Ravine Tower with his fellow Legion members, before the

mock Territories with the Green Legion. Kuroyukihime and Fuko had predicted that the Space stage would be implemented that same day, the reason being that July 14 was Sunflower Day, a celebration of the day the first Japanese weather satellite was launched. Their prediction turned out to be a bull's-eye, and Nega Nebulus had pulled off a magnificent victory in the mock Territories in the Space stage. But Haruyuki hadn't been able to keep from wondering if Sunflower Day and space weren't a bit too obvious of an excuse for the administrator. Now that Cosmos was telling him the admin was an AI, that heavy-handedness made a certain kind of sense. Or so he felt.

And through the memories he'd experienced by way of the Armor of Catastrophe, he'd seen that Chrome Falcon had been thinking the same thing. Given that the admin rendered null the holes Burst Linkers discovered in the system—the delightful cheats—at astonishing speed, he'd wondered if maybe they weren't actually human but rather an AI. In fact, the technique he used when he broke into the Castle, crossing the moat and wall with a series of Flash Blink trips, had become impossible in the blink of an eye when the gravity around the moat was enhanced.

As if she'd been waiting for Haruyuki's surprise to turn into understanding, the White King opened her mouth once more. "It's not as though I have met the admin, either, but there's no mistake. However, if you hadn't interfered earlier in Kitanomaru Park, I would've become a level ten and been able to confirm its true nature."

"I'll interfere as many times as I have to," he declared firmly before returning to the subject at hand. "Even if the Brain Burst admin is an AI, how is that connected to what happened when Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt ended?"

"It means that the admin of this world is not an omnipotent god, just like leaders A and B. And that an old-school AI that doesn't use STLT is a monster in intent pursuit of optimization," the White King murmured, and then raised her slender hands to form a shape as if she were holding onto two transparent spheres.

"It would at least be better if the admin AI *were* an omnipotent god. In that case, in order to close the world, it could simply seize the program and memories from all players. But not being a god, it doesn't have that much

authority. To do the processing that would force an uninstall and erase memories, it first needs all players to have zero points. And thus...”

The White King slowly brought her hands together to fuse the invisible spheres into one.

“Right from the start, the admin AI incorporated a gimmick into the world to accomplish this. Its own proxy, an execution device. Not all-powerful but with exceptional abilities nonetheless.”

“An execution...device?” Haruyuki repeated the ominous words with dread, and looked at Tezcatlipoca once more.

The massive dark-red body with its unusual lack of detail did indeed seem more like an inorganic, synthetic object than a living creature. But it wasn’t like there were absolutely no other Enemies with this kind of design. And to start with...

“Isn’t that how all Enemies are? There are some that aren’t active, but most just attack without question.”

“But it’s not as though any of those Enemies are utterly unbeatable, yes? Even with the Four Gods of the Castle, you feel the possibility at least. You said so yourself at Kitanomaru Park. If everyone there joined forces, we could make the Castle’s Gods bend to us.”

“That’s...true, but...”

“Tezcatlipoca, however, is different. If every Burst Linker in the Accelerated World came together and attacked it, they wouldn’t even be able to cut those ten health gauges in half. Crow, do you think that egg for Tezcatlipoca, the Sun God Inti, was rolling around the Mean Level at random, with no particular purpose?”

“...It wasn’t?”

“Depending on the type, some Enemies can grow, too. The more Burst Linkers or other Enemies they defeat, the stronger they become. For eight thousand years of internal time, since the dawn of the Accelerated World, Inti has burned up countless Burst Linkers and Enemies, and nurtured Tezcatlipoca inside its shell. To bring about the end of the world. And to erase every single Burst

Linker when that end comes.”

“ ... ”

Haruyuki was speechless for a time.

Simply turning off the servers to end the game would leave the players with their memories. They had to be pushed to total point loss to erase those memories, and the only way to push them to total point loss was to destroy them through some means. He understood all this, but still.

“I think that story has at least two large contradictions,” he said quietly, and Cosmos’s eye lenses flashed for an instant.

“And they are?”

“First, the admin AI that made Tezcatlipoca is on the side of leader B—the side that made this game in order to release the Being sealed in the Castle. I feel like they could just defeat the Four Gods and charge the Castle with the absolutely unbeatable Tezcatlipoca and achieve their objective.”

“And?”

“And the other one is the question of why you could tame Tezcatlipoca, when it’s supposed to be unbeatable even with the combined forces of all Burst Linkers. Someone told me that tamable Enemies are the ones that in principle could be defeated in one-on-one combat. If you could defeat Tezcatlipoca on your own, then that contradicts what you’re telling me.”

“...I see. Mm-hmm.” The White King nodded twice, and he felt an unusual air of hesitation around her. She crossed her arms in front of an impossibly narrow waist and moved the index finger of her right hand. “Mmm. That is top-level, key information. We’ve come this far, however, so I suppose I can answer you. But once I do, you will only have two options left to you.”

“What options are those?”

“Cooperate with us or lose all your points right here, of course.”

“ ... ”

Haruyuki’s entire body stiffened. There was no way he would ever cooperate with the White Legion—the Acceleration Research Society—and he couldn’t go

losing all his points now. But he wasn't particularly keen on being stuck in limbo by cutting off the conversation here. After agonizing over it for several seconds, he resolved on the compromise of withdrawing the two questions.

The White King suddenly swayed and then stared into space. "Unfortunately, it looks as though we will have to continue this next time."

"Huh? Wh-why..."

"Your light cube—your quantum thought circuits—has started the back-up process. Your Neurolinker is being removed in the real world."

"What?!" How could the White King sense a process that Haruyuki himself wasn't aware of? And before that, why was his Neurolinker being removed?! ... He was stunned at first, but then realized that of course, that was only natural.

Most likely, Kuroyukihime had burst out from the portal closest to Kitanomaru Park and turned to force-disconnect Haruyuki the moment her eyes opened. Given that White Cosmos had the special attack, Resurrect by Compassion, which forced regeneration with no regard for the wait time, she could steal a massive amount of points in a short period of time if she alternated between attacking and regenerating. If their positions were reversed, Haruyuki, too, would have tried to remove Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker at top speed.

It wasn't clear how many seconds he had left until he was actually disconnected, but for the sake of his comrades, he had to get as much information as he could. As he panicked and wondered what to do next, the White King posed a question.

"Silver Crow, did you dive with a Legion member in the real?"

"Huh? Y-yeah, Kuroyukihime," he answered reflexively.

She pulled back slightly. "With Lotus? At this hour? So you have *that* kind of relationship?"

"That kind...? Oh! N-no, we don't!" he cried, flustered, and then finally felt it. A sensation of decelerating, like the center of his field of view was receding in a tunnel.

The last things he heard were the calm words of the White King.

“I’ll contact you again within the week. Decide what you’re going to do before we meet next. And if you dive on your own at any other day and time than the one I specify, consider yourself dead a second later. And your comrades, as well, of course.”

Before he could reply, his senses were swallowed up by darkness.

Even after he opened his eyes, he couldn’t immediately understand what was in front of him. His hazy vision gradually came into focus, and he was able to tell that it was a person’s—Kuroyukihime’s—face.

“Are you okay, Haruyuki?!” she cried, shaking his shoulder. He noticed that her ebony eyes were slightly damp, and he gasped unconsciously before nodding several times in quick succession.

“Y-yeah, I’m fine. I’m sorry to worry you,” he replied hoarsely, and tried to sit up, but couldn’t manage it. Because Kuroyukihime, in her long T-shirt, was straddling his stomach. “Uh, um, Kuroyukihime?”

“You’re really okay?! You didn’t lose all your points?!”

“O-of course not. Not only did I not lose all my points, I didn’t even die once.”

The tension in her face finally eased and she let out a long breath. “Good.” She nodded and lifted a leg to move off to his side.

Although all the lights were off, there was a dim brightness to the Arita living room. Haruyuki had entered the Unlimited Neutral Field at one thirty AM, but it was currently almost five AM now, and the sky outside the window was starting to brighten.

He tensed his abdominal muscles and this time sat up when he heard a new voice from his right.

“Um. Here. For you.”

When he looked, Rin Kusakabe was sitting formally on her knees, offering him a glass with both hands. Instantly, he was overcome with thirst and he accepted it with a thank-you.

He quaffed the cool water in a single gulp and felt a gradual numbness spread

out in his head. He realized that he had been under incredible stress nonstop, from the moment the attack on the Sun God Inti began until Kuroyukihime had pulled off his Neurolinker.

Holding the now-empty glass, he turned back to Kuroyukihime sitting slumped beside him, and apologized again. “I’m sorry for getting captured so easily.”

“No. You have nothing to apologize for. In fact, I’m the one who should be apologizing. All I could do is watch as you were abducted, after you saved me—no, all the kings—from sudden death.” Her voice was filled with pain and regret.

“No!” He leaned forward. “The important thing is that you were able to escape safely through a portal. If we managed that, then whatever happens to me is a small price to pay!”

“Don’t talk like that! I haven’t the slightest intention of sacrificing you to save myself!” She was sitting so close to him on her knees, they practically bumped his.

“Cut to the chase. What happened?” came a calm voice from behind.

He reflexively jumped and then looked back, half-standing.

A girl in a tank top and shorts, with her long hair pulled into a ponytail, was leaning deeply into the sofa on the south side of the rug where Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime, and Rin were sitting. This was “Ruthless,” the one who had imparted the ways of Omega style Whole Blade to Haruyuki, Centaurea Sentry, aka Seri Suzukawa.

When they’d finished his four months of training in the Unlimited Neutral Field, Seri had left Haruyuki at Oumutei and returned to the real world, so she didn’t know the details of the attack on Inti. The same went for Rin, who had taken on the role of messenger to Kuroyukihime. He had to explain to them what had happened without leaving out a single detail.

“Um.” He stood up as he tried to sort the information in his head and was about to start speaking.

“Mmm.”

He heard another voice from behind him, so he looked back once more. Kuroyukihime was also standing, brow furrowed, as her fingers raced through the air.

“Calls from Fuko, Utai, Akira. Oh, and Chiyuri, Takumu, Niko, and Leopard. And from Choco and Rui, too.”

In other words, the entire Legion was calling Kuroyukihime. They probably wanted to check that Haruyuki was safe, in which case they could’ve just called him directly. And then he noticed his Neurolinker in Kuroyukihime’s left hand.

“Um, Kuroyukihime, in that case, could you ask them to connect to my VR space so that I can explain everything to everyone in a dive chat?”

“Mmm, I suppose...,” Kuroyukihime started, but then quickly shook her head, firmly. “No, you should take a proper break. The explanation can come later. Whatever situation Silver Crow is in in the Unlimited Neutral Field, you’re not in any danger as long as you don’t dive again.”

It was true that a weariness had seeped into not just his brain, but his very bones. But when he thought about it, this was strange. While he was accelerated, he’d been thinking not with his brain but with his personal quantum circuits in the Main Visualizer, and the moment he burst out, his memories alone had been synchronized. It didn’t make sense for his exhaustion to be carried over into the real world.

Even as he tried to tell himself this, his eyelids grew heavier and heavier, so he blinked several times before replying, “Okay then. I’m sorry, but I think I’ll do exactly that.”

“Rest as long as you need to,” Kuroyukihime said and held his Neurolinker out to him.

He took it in both hands and then turned to Rin. “My thanks to you, too, Rin, for today.”

“Next time I’ll. Fight with. You.”

“I’m counting on it.” He looked at Seri next and bowed his head low. “Um. Maestro—I mean, Seri—given the situation, please allow me to explain it in detail later, but just two things. Thanks to the ‘extreme’ of your Omega style, I

was able to cut into Inti's body."

"Oh? Good."

He almost grinned at the too-cool response, but pulled his lips tight and continued. "And...I feel like I was able to use Gou, too. For just a second, though."

This time, Seri's expression changed ever so slightly. A faint surprise. And a smile. She nodded without a word and stood up from the sofa. "I'm going home, then. Loads happened, but it was fun."

"Thank you so much!" Haruyuki bowed his head once more, and Seri patted his shoulder before hoisting her backpack up from the floor and starting for the living room door.

But Kuroyukihime reached out a hand to stop her. "Ruthless—no, Sentry—no, Seri." She corrected herself twice, cleared her throat, and continued. "I also offer my sincere gratitude. You really were a great help. And I know it sounds like an afterthought, but join our Legion."

"What?"

It wasn't Seri who cried out, but Haruyuki. The image of Centaurea Sentry as the proud, solitary, great swordmaster was strong in his mind, and he hadn't even considered inviting her into Nega Nebulus, but it was true it would make him rest easier if she were to combine her force with theirs. He waited for her reply with bated breath.

"Kuroyuki," Seri said. "I know it's not that you don't remember how I've rejected every Legion initiation, right?"

"Of course not. But back then, you also stubbornly refused to make an apprentice, much less a child. If you've yielded on one principle, then it's no great difference to yield on two." Kuroyukihime spoke in her usual fashion, a little too directly, and Haruyuki secretly worried that Seri would get mad.

Seri stared intently at the shorter girl and then said, "That's true. Okay, I'll join."

"Gah?!" Haruyuki cried out in pure shock, and Seri and Kuroyukihime both

turned their gazes on him.

“What of this, Crow? Do you dislike that I would join your Legion?” Seri asked in her formal Accelerated World style, and he moved his head from side to side at top speed.

“N-no, no, no, no, not at all! Um, I-I’m super happy about it!!”

“All is well, then.” She turned back to Kuroyukihime. “I’m disconnected globally right now. Can we direct to do the admission process?”

“Certainly. Haruyuki, if you would.” Kuroyukihime held out a hand, so Haruyuki grabbed an XSB cable sitting on the low table and thrust it at her.

Once the two Neurolinkers were connected, Kuroyukihime said, “Burst Link.” The two girls froze for an instant, and then she immediately began to remove the cable, so Haruyuki let out his breath. He’d worried that they might duel while they were at it, but in that case, they would have accelerated for a minimum of one second.

Kuroyukihime and Seri wordlessly extended their right hands and shook them firmly.

The veteran swordmaster, having joined Nega Nebulus hot on the heels of her return to the Accelerated World, nodded at Haruyuki and Rin before walking toward the living room door, head high.

“Um, Suzukawa?” Rin called out timidly to her back. “Are you. Going home like. That?”

Seri froze and looked down at herself, clad in a set of sleepwear tank top and shorts, before looking back. “Arita, I have to change. Let me use your washroom.”



When he thought about it with a cool head, the fact that he had been disconnected from the Unlimited Neutral Field definitely didn't mean that his—Silver Crow's—safety was assured. Since he hadn't left normally through a portal, if he dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field, he would appear on the balcony of Heimwert Castle, and just as the White King had warned him, he would most likely die immediately in an attack from Tezcatlipoca standing before him the moment he dived. And then the same thing would be neatly repeated every hour.

For the first time since he'd reached level four, he'd been placed in what was for all intents and purposes an Unlimited EK. Just the thought that he couldn't enter the Unlimited Neutral Field—the true face of the Accelerated World—made his lungs constrict. He had previously tried to put himself into the shoes of Utai and Akira when they had been sealed at the four gates, or of Kuroyukihime when she was caught up in the Inti drop, but this difficulty breathing, like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room, went beyond anything he'd imagined.

Even so, the instant he flopped down on his bed after seeing Seri, Rin, and Kuroyukihime off at the front door, sleep descended on him like a switch being hit. Wrapped in a warm, gentle darkness, he slept and slept, deeply, soundly.

He could hardly remember it when he woke, but he had a curious experience while he was asleep.

He guessed it was a dream. He was walking intently through a barren wasteland that stretched out endlessly to the horizon. His entire body was horribly injured, and a dull pain shot through him with every step he took, but he couldn't stop moving. Because the thunderous, heavy shaking of the earth

pursued him ceaselessly from behind.

He looked back over his shoulder as he walked. Something terribly large was moving in the distance in the colorless field. A giant, its entire body covered in red flames. Each time it brought down a tree trunk of a leg and fists like blocks of stone, flashes of multicolored light flickered on the ground, and faint shrieks rose up.

The comrades he had been fighting alongside were being mowed down by the giant. Haruyuki had fled alone from that battleground. He had to go back...But even as he had this thought, his feet did not stop. Farther. To get even just a little farther away, his feet continued to pound at the dried earth.

The sounds of battle that reached his ears gradually became fewer and farther between until finally silence fell.

Timidly looking over his shoulder, he saw that the giant had stopped completely. He could see nothing moving at its feet. The massacre was over. The comrades who had fought so bravely at the battleground he had fled had all been annihilated.

The end that had been predicted from the start. The demise of the world.

The giant frozen in the distance slowly turned its head to look at him. The ring that floated pale above its blank head flashed almost like an eye.

“—Gah!!”

A shiver of fear shook his body and woke him up. Still lying in bed, he blinked several times. The air conditioner, controlled by the home server, should have been keeping the room at the perfect temperature and humidity, but his face and chest were drenched in sweat.

As he waited for his pounding heart to calm, Haruyuki tried to remember the nightmare he'd had, but only lingering notes of terror, despair, and resignation drifted through his head like painful smoke, and even these soon disappeared.

He let out the breath he'd been holding and sat up. He'd left his Neurolinker off, so he looked at the clock on his desk and saw that the digital display showed 10:07 AM. He'd gone to bed around six AM, so he'd only slept for about four hours.

Even so, he felt like he had slept more than plenty. When he thought about it, there were also the four hours he'd gotten in before his training with Centaurea Sentry, so altogether, that was a full eight hours. Kuroyukihime had set the Legion meeting for three that afternoon, so that he could get some serious sleep. But since he'd woken up naturally in the morning, it seemed a waste to go back to sleep again.

Despite the bad dream, his panic over the Unlimited EK had grown weak enough to ignore, thanks to the solid sleep he'd had. Getting out of bed, he got a change of clothes and left his bedroom, thinking he should take a shower first.

As he walked down the dim hallway, he equipped his Neurolinker and launched his virtual desktop. Instantly, a flood of notifications about missed voice calls and mail poured in. When he hurried to check them, it wasn't just his

friends in Nega Nebulus; there were a lot of messages from members of other Legions connected with anonymous mail addresses. The last time they'd seen him, he was being abducted by Tezcatlipoca, so it was only natural that they would want to know what had happened.

Kuroyukihime, Fuko, or Chiyuri had probably replied to them on his behalf. Still, he opened his mail app as he stood in the hallway. He typed "I'M SORRY TO TAKE A WHILE TO ANSWER YOU. I'M FINE FOR NOW. I'LL LET YOU KNOW THE DETAILS LATER." He sent it to all the Burst Linkers who had messaged him.

Walking toward the living room once more, he looked at the door of his mother's bedroom on the left side of the hall and saw a holotag floating there that said she was in the room and sleeping. She must have come home while he was asleep. He quietly opened the door at the end of the hall so as not to make a sound.

The moment he entered the bright living room, a message window appeared above the table—a note from his mother. He moved over to it and read it.

"I HAD ONE OF THE WRAPS IN THE FRIDGE. I'LL BE AT HOME UNTIL TOMORROW AFTERNOON, SO IF YOUR SPEECH FOR THE STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION IS DONE, YOU SHOULD LET ME SEE IT."

"Aah." He closed the window before moving into the kitchen. He drank a glass of chilled barley tea and went through the living room to the bathroom. As the hot shower poured down on him, he thought about the student council election.

Two weeks earlier, Mayu Ikuzawa, class representative of grade eight, class C, had invited Takumu and Haruyuki to put their names up together with hers for the next student council.

The student council at Umesato Junior High was somewhat peculiar. Normally, candidates for president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer stood on their own as individuals and received separate votes, but at Umesato, the four people stood together from the start as a team. In other words, the staffing abilities and management capabilities of the student who would be council president was tested from the election campaign stage. This was really no surprise for a school managed by a major educational company.

In that sense, he understood very well why Mayu had chosen Takumu. He was

the eighth-grade kendo team ace, had excellent grades, and on top of that, he was super nice and good-looking. He didn't have a single thing against him as a candidate. Meanwhile, Haruyuki's grades were only so-so, sports were a no-go, and he stammered and stuttered, a real piece of work. When Mayu had asked him, he'd been surprised and skeptical that she would pick the least suitable person in their grade, but she'd apparently settled on him because of things like how he'd polished the AR mapping project on his own for the class display at the school festival and his work as president of the Animal Care Club.

That said, however, Haruyuki thought being a member of the student council was just too much for him. And more importantly, he thought that he would end up dragging everyone else down if he did stand for election, and cause the whole team to lose, so he'd been planning to say no initially. But he'd changed his thinking after discussing it with Takumu and Kuroyukihime.

The most direct reason was the question that Kuroyukihime had posed to him:

"Is there any meaning in work without results...? That's what you're thinking right now, yes?"

Exactly. Haruyuki had told himself this ever since he was little. Whatever it was, if he was going to fail and feel pathetic, then it was better to not even do it right from the start. But through his many encounters and experiences in the Accelerated World, this backward way of thinking had gradually changed bit by bit.

Trying for his own sake, for someone else's sake. Trying simply because he wanted to try. That repeated effort definitely wasn't nothing. So on the day before the closing ceremony for the semester, Haruyuki had said yes to Mayu Ikuzawa on the roof of Umesato Junior High.

Now that he'd accepted, he had to take it seriously. The election campaign would start with the beginning of the second term, but there were a lot of things to do before then. He wanted to finish the draft of his speech his mother's note mentioned sooner rather than later, and more than anything else, they had to urgently decide on the fourth member of their team. Mayu was obviously looking for that person herself, but she'd told Haruyuki that if he

thought of someone, he should tell her. He wanted to be able to offer up at least one name when she messaged him.

With these thoughts swirling around his mind, he washed himself, rinsed the suds off, and stepped out of the bathroom. He returned to his own room and checked the time before changing into his uniform. He left a message in the note app—"I'M AT SCHOOL FOR MY CLUB WORK. MY SPEECH MIGHT TAKE A LITTLE MORE TIME"—and headed for the kitchen once more. He opened the fridge and took one of the three remaining tortilla rolls from the plate.

While he was at it, he pulled out a small container from a corner of the top shelf and headed for the sink opposite the fridge. As he tucked into the tortilla, he opened the container.

"Aah!" he cried out, a bite of tortilla almost falling out of his mouth. He narrowly managed to clamp his jaw shut around it and hurriedly swallowed it as he stared at the interior of the container.

Pale brown elliptical shapes about seven millimeters long sitting on top of damp gauze—cherry pits. On the seventh of that month, Niko and Kuroyukihime had launched a surprise attack on the Arita house, leading to an impromptu slumber party, and for dessert after supper, he'd brought out the cherries that his mother's father had sent. Niko had loved them and suggested that they grow the seeds.

Sweet cherry trees were generally grown through grafting, and it was fairly difficult to cultivate them from seeds. To get a seed to sprout required a low-temperature, humid environment, which was definitely impossible outside in July, so they'd lined up the twelve seeds that they'd washed and dried on top of damp gauze and stored them in the Arita refrigerator. Haruyuki had been careful to add water every day, but...

In the two weeks up to that day, the little seeds had been utterly silent, and now three of them had several very fine roots that at first glance looked like mold, poking their faces out the sides. Exposed to the cold of midwinter for two weeks, the seeds had awakened and germinated.

"Ooh, you did it," he said quietly, but the truth was, he'd succeeded when he'd attempted the same thing several years earlier. Back then, he'd planted

the sprouted seeds in a pot on the balcony, but maybe because the soil was too old or because he'd given them too much water, they hadn't made it all the way to sprouts, sadly. He wondered how it would turn out this time.

He laid out a new piece of gauze in a separate container, gently moved the three germinated seeds, and pulled the gauze over top of them. He put the lid on and after thinking for a minute, put it into a small insulated bag with a cold pack. He filled his water bottle with ice and barley tea and headed for the front door, where he took a messenger bag from a hook on the wall and tucked the bag and the bottle inside. He slung it across his chest, put on a cap hanging from another hook, slipped on some mesh sneakers, and slowly opened the door.

Instantly, a wave of intense flames slammed up against his face, even though it was still early in the day. Normally, he would want to close the door again, but having just one thing to look forward to made him feel like he could deal with the summer heat somehow.

He stepped out into the hallway and listened to the click of the door locking behind him as he ran off to the elevator.

Although he'd walked in the shade as much as possible, by the time he arrived at the gates of Umesato Junior High, his shirt was drenched with sweat.

He stopped for a second inside the gates, pulled a towel from his bag, and wiped his face and neck. He waited until the sweat abated a little before heading toward the courtyard behind the second school building, also known as the old school.

When he walked down the path wedged between the school and the high enclosing wall, an open space suddenly appeared ahead of him. The central—or rather, rear—courtyard in a hidden corner of the Umesato premises. Despite the fact that it was closed in on two sides by concrete walls and on a third by the school building, it got surprisingly good light.

In the northernmost part of the yard was a wooden hut. Four meters on each side, two and a half meters tall. Compared with the school, it was tiny, but it had a total floor space of sixteen square meters, so it was bigger than Haruyuki's bedroom.

The student sweeping the leaves in front of the hut looked up at the sound of

his footsteps. “Huh? Hey, Prez. Was today your day?”

Reina Izeki. She was one of the members of the Umesato Junior High Animal Care Club, of which Haruyuki was president. Whenever he caught sight of her inside the school, she was seriously on the made-up and done-up side of things, so it felt strange to see her now with her wavy hair pulled back, wearing the official white school cap and gym clothes.

“No.” He held up a hand in greeting as he drew nearer and came to a stop in front of her. “I was on duty yesterday, so my next day is tomorrow. But I had some free time, so I figured I’d stop by.”

It hadn’t been too long ago that he would stammer and stutter whenever he talked to her. *I used to be so scared of her...* He secretly basked in the memory, while Reina blinked twice before grinning like she’d just remembered something.

“Free time? Prez, if you got that many girls on you, you don’t got any free time over summer break!”

“Gi—?! I-I don’t have girls!!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Freaking out, that’s the prez I know.” Reina laughed, teasing him, and he heard a flapping noise from inside the hut.

When he peered through the wire mesh around the front of the hut, he could see Hoo, the northern white-faced owl, moving his wings on top of the perch that stood on the floor. Haruyuki had recently come to understand that this wasn’t because he was mad or upset. It was more like Hoo’s own particular way of greeting him.

The Umesato Junior High Animal Care Club had been launched only last month to take care of this very Hoo, and Haruyuki had become its president half by accident. Officially, in addition to Reina, Hamajima was also a club member, but he hadn’t been seen at the hutch since showing his face on the very first day. As president, Haruyuki really should have done something about this, but just imagining the scene where he went to Hamajima’s class and rebuked him for neglecting his duties made a cold sweat run down his back. So he decided they would go along as they were for the time being—whether that was forward-or backward-looking, he didn’t know.

“Dang, though.” Reina wiped the sweat from her forehead with a hand. “The heat this year’s brutal. Is Hoo really okay in this kind of furnace?”

“Mm-hmm. He’s from Africa originally, so I guess he’s good with heat. But I’m actually a little worried, too.”

They both looked into the hut at the same time. Hoo on his perch stopped flapping his wings, perhaps sensing their gazes on him, and looked back at them with his large orange eyes. The way he cocked his head to one side seemed to be a question about where his breakfast was, so Haruyuki sent him the mental message “Sorry, not yet” before turning back to Reina.

“The hutch is big and gets a nice breeze, and he has the big water area, so I think he’ll be okay as long as we check on him regularly. But let’s talk about it again when Shinomiya gets here. What time’s she supposed to come?”

“She said eleven thirty, so right about now?”

“Oh, yeah? Okay, I’ll help with the cleaning.”

“Thanks, Prez.” Reina grinned and, looking at the sweat popping up on her forehead once again, Haruyuki pulled his thermos from his bag and offered it to her.

“It’s barley tea. You can have some if you want. Oh! I haven’t used the cup yet, so it’s okay.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Indirect kissing doesn’t bother me none!” She slapped his shoulder and took the thermos with a “Thanks.” He hurriedly moved away to set his bag on the staircase of the back entrance to the old school that he always used as a place to keep his things. He opened up the nearby toolshed and brought out a deck brush and a multi-nozzle hose.

He connected the hose to the faucet on the side of the animal hutch and went into the hutch. He called out to Hoo, “I’m cleaning up!” before he began to peel away the thick waterproof sheets spread out around the perch. He took these, together with the large bird bath, outside and began to spray the floor with water. The sheets caught the large majority of his poop, so it wasn’t too dirty, and Utai had also said that cleaning the floor once a week was fine, but Haruyuki was sure Hoo would be more comfortable if it was always clean.

He pushed the water and dirt and feathers out of the hutch with the deck brush. The hutch didn't look very big from the outside, but once you went inside, four meters squared was surprisingly spacious. With the brush in his right hand and the hose in his left, he made the return trip north-south over and over.

He focused on the work at hand, and right around the time the entire surface of the natural wood floor was a wet burnt brown, he heard Reina's voice from outside.

"Super Prez, how you doing?"

Haruyuki couldn't see said "Super Prez," but a chat window opened in his field of view.

UI> HELLO, IZEKI.

Even though there was no way Hoo could have seen this text, he flapped his wings on his perch.

"This time, it *is* breakfast," he said to the owl and left the hutch with the brush and hose.

Utai Shinomiya stood in front of Reina, wearing the white dress of her uniform. She attended the private Matsunogi Academy's elementary division, a school affiliated with Umesato Junior High, and the reason that Reina Izeki called her "Super Prez" was because the Umesato Animal Care Club had been started at her request.

She lifted the edge of the white wide-brimmed hat she wore to prevent heatstroke, saw Haruyuki coming out of the hutch, and blinked her large eyes.

UI> OH! I THOUGHT YOU WERE ON DUTY TOMORROW, ARITA.

"Yeah, I am, but..."

Naturally, they had to continue to care for Hoo over summer break, but since there were only three people in the Animal Care Club, including Utai, who attended a different school, the duty day came around every third day. Or it should have, but while Haruyuki and Reina came every other day, Utai came every day because she was the only one who could feed Hoo at present. If she

was nearby, the owl would also eat from Haruyuki's hand, but that still meant Utai couldn't have a break. Thus Haruyuki had decided to try and come in as much as possible over summer break, even when it wasn't his turn on duty.

Hiding this thought, he said the same thing he had earlier: "I had nothing to do, so I came to help."

UI> IS THAT SO? Utai typed in an instant, and then pulled her hands away from her holo keyboard to clasp them in front of her, her face clouding over ever so slightly.

It took him a couple seconds to guess the reason for this.

Utai—Ardor Maiden—had witnessed Silver Crow being spirited away by Tezcatlipoca in Kitanomaru Park in the Unlimited Neutral Field. She would have gotten the message from Kuroyukihime or Fuko that he'd managed an emergency disconnect, so he was in no danger for the time being. But she still didn't know exactly what had happened to him.

He tossed aside the brush and the hose, took a few steps forward, and wrapped his own hands around Utai's smaller ones. "Um, Mei—Shinomiya, I'm okay. Sorry to worry you. But I'm really okay."

Her eyes widened for a second before she nodded, her cheeks reddening the slightest bit. Her lips trembled as if she were going to say something, but no voice came out. Since she suffered from expressive aphasia, Utai was unable to speak in the real world and conversed through chat by way of a brain implant chip, but because Haruyuki was clasping her hands, she couldn't type.

"Oh! I-I'm sorry!" He released her hands and jumped back. He was about to heap on another apology, but Utai stopped him with both hands held out and smiled as she nodded. He didn't even have a chance to sigh in relief before Reina's voice was coming at him from behind.

"Whoa, whoa, Prez. You can't go hittin' on a little kid! That's harassment!"

"Har—I-I wasn't!" Haruyuki refuted the grinning Reina with his entire being and picked up the brush and hose. He looked at Utai once more, sent her the thought, *I'll explain everything at the meeting*, and retreated to the hutch.

He carried the sheets and bird bath he'd taken out of the hutch over to the

faucet, spread the sheets out on the ground, and set the multi-nozzle to a jet of water to wash away the dirt. The treatment-coated sheets were clean soon enough, so he set them out in the sun to dry. Then he neatly washed the bird bath with a sponge.

While he was doing this, Reina finished cleaning up the dead leaves and weeds. They put the tools away together and when they returned to the hutch, Utai was just putting the leather falcon glove on her left hand. Inside the hutch, Hoo flapped his wings enthusiastically, certain that this time was definitely breakfast.

Utai entered the hutch, followed by Reina carrying the large container with Hoo's food, and Haruyuki holding the dried waterproof sheets. Hoo flew up from his perch, did three laps clockwise around the four-meter square hutch, and landed gently on Utai's raised arm. The owl opened and closed its beak like it could hardly wait, and Utai gently stroked his head with the fingertips of her free hand.

Next to her, Reina opened the cooler and held it up at the level of Utai's chest. Inside was reddish-black raw meat wrapped in plastic and a pair of plastic tweezers. Utai took the tweezers in her right hand, grabbed a piece of meat, and brought it up to Hoo's mouth, and Hoo dug in, swallowing it whole.

Hoo's food was the raw meat of mice, chicks, or quail. Utai bought the animals frozen and cut them up herself. From the color and shape, today's meal appeared to be quail. Haruyuki had come to understand that much at least, but he still had zero interest in cutting the meat up. Utai had showed him how to fillet a frozen mouse with a small knife, but it had taken everything he had in him not to avert his eyes. He did have to get to the point where he could do that work and the feeding, though, so that Utai could have a day off.

"So, like, Super Prez," Reina said, suddenly, in a low voice. "Utaicchi. You think I could give it a go?"

Utai stopped moving and looked up at Reina. A warm smile soon spread across her face and she nodded firmly.

Taking the offered tweezers, Reina grabbed a smallish piece of meat and brought it to Hoo's mouth with a careful hand.

Hoo had shown off a vigorous appetite up to that point, but now he curtly turned his face away. He looked up at Reina with large eyes and puffed up all his feathers as if to threaten her.

The owl had once been someone's pet, but they had been irresponsible and abandoned him. Utai had found him curled up in the yard of Matsunogi Academy. He hadn't run away, though—he had a crater carved out of his flesh with a knife of some kind, in the spot where the individual identification chip mandated by the reformed animal welfare laws lay under his skin.

Ever since, Hoo had trusted no humans other than Utai, who had rescued him when he was on the verge of dying. Recently, he'd also started accepting food from Haruyuki's hand, but only when he was sitting on Utai's arm.

Seeing Hoo in this threatening posture, Reina muttered, "So that's a 'no,' then" as she moved to return the food to the cooler. But Utai quickly touched Reina's back as if to encourage her. She looked at Hoo on her arm and her lips trembled faintly.

Once again, Haruyuki thought about how frustrating it must have been. At a time like this, Utai couldn't say a word to Hoo or to Reina. She couldn't even move her mouth in the shape of the words. About the only possible exception was when she silently chanted the acceleration command.

He wanted to say something to Hoo on her behalf, but he kept his mouth shut. Utai was earnestly trying to communicate with the owl without speaking. He shouldn't go butting in.

Finally, Hoo's puffed-up feathers slowly began to fall back down, and he gradually straightened up. Blinking several times, he looked up at Reina's face as if inspecting it. Utai's hand was still touching Reina's back and now she moved it as if giving a signal. Hesitantly, Reina raised her hand and brought the piece of meat toward Hoo once more.

This time, he didn't turn his face away or try to threaten her, but he also didn't eat it right away. He kept rocking back and forth almost like he was testing Reina, or rather himself. This movement stopped abruptly, and when he cocked his head slightly to one side, he snatched the meat and swallowed it.

Utai moved her hand again. Reina straightened up with a gasp and reached

out for another piece of meat with the tweezers. With no sign of lingering hesitation, Hoo took the meat into his beak.

Haruyuki could see small droplets running from the corners of her eyes down her cheeks. There was no mistake, the way they caught the light—Reina was crying as she smiled. As he watched this, unable to say anything, he had a sudden thought.

We should ask Izeki.

The fourth, as yet undecided, member of their student council team. He would have to talk to Mayu Ikuzawa first, and it wasn't clear whether or not Reina would accept, but even so, Haruyuki wanted to fight this election campaign with Reina. And serve with her on the student council if they won.

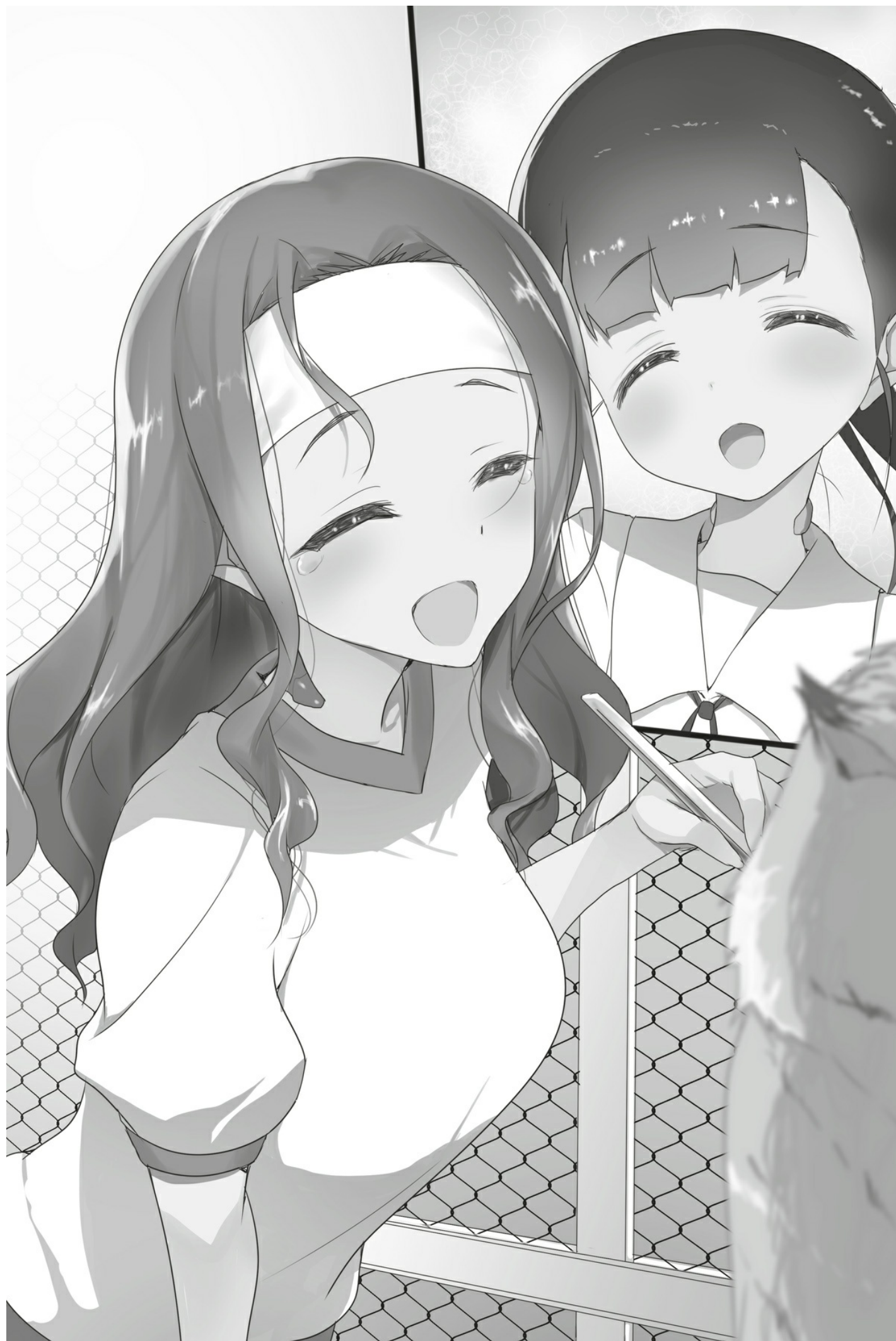
When he'd talked with Mayu before about what to do about the fourth person, she'd said that "*someone with a sharpness like you and Mayuzumi'd be good.*" Surprised, Haruyuki had replied, "*Taku is one thing, but that doesn't fit me at all,*" and Mayu had digested this with a serious face.

The truth is, I think that everyone has something different from other people, something that's just theirs. But it's hard to express that to the outside world. What's important is whether or not you actually do the things you like, the things you're able to.

Reina Izeki was a person who didn't lie to herself. It had only been a month since they'd started working together in the Animal Care Club, and they'd basically never talked about anything that wasn't club-related, but he was sure of this.

Finally, his stomach full, Hoo flew up from Utai's arm and around the hutch—this time, counterclockwise—before returning to his perch. Reina, perhaps finally realizing that she was crying, wiped her eyes with a hand as she looked at Utai and Haruyuki and laughed, embarrassed.

One PM. Their work completed, they finished off Haruyuki's cold barley tea and said good-bye in the rear courtyard.



He watched Reina head off to the changing room and then looked up at the sky, at last the clear blue of midsummer. While he was reveling at the vastness of it—

UI> ARITA, ARE YOU REALLY OKAY?

This text popped up before his eyes, and he hurriedly looked to his side to find Utai staring up at him from beneath her wide-brimmed hat. Her black eyes held a worried light.

“I-I’m okay. Really. As of the moment, I haven’t lost a single point,” he told her, but her face didn’t clear.

The fingers of both hands tapped quickly at the air. UI> BUT THE FACT THAT IT WAS AN EMERGENCY DISCONNECT MEANS THAT YOU DIDN’T ESCAPE FROM YOUR CONFINED STATE, YES? Her fingers stopped as though she were uncertain, before starting to type again. UI> FU TOLD ME THAT WE’D GET THE DETAILS AT THE THREE O’CLOCK MEETING. I KNOW IT WOULD BE TWICE THE TROUBLE FOR YOU IF I ASKED YOU TO EXPLAIN IT TO ME NOW, BUT TO BE HONEST, I’M JUST SO WORRIED, I CAN HARDLY STAND IT. I FEEL LIKE EVEN AS WE’RE HERE LIKE THIS, SOMETHING’S HAPPENING SOMEWHERE INVISIBLE TO US, SOMETHING WE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO COME BACK FROM...

“ ... ”

Unable to respond immediately, Haruyuki bit his lip. The issue definitely wasn’t “twice the trouble.” If it would reassure Utai, he’d gladly explain everything now. But in truth, he also wasn’t entirely certain of the situation into which he’d been placed himself.

An Unlimited EK, for all intents and purposes—that much was certain. But the issue was why the White King had abducted him and told him all those things. Whatever he had learned or would learn, Haruyuki would never betray Nega Nebulus or the Black King, so there was no advantage for her in doing this. If she wanted to push him to total point loss, she could have simply killed him on the spot rather than sitting him down for a chat.

He shook his head slightly. “Shinomiya, I’m sorry to worry you. But the White King only took me to Tokyo Grand Castle. She didn’t do anything to me there. I don’t know if I can escape or not, but there’s definitely no immediate danger.”

Utai furrowed her brow. UI> TOKYO GRAND CASTLE? WHY THERE?

“No idea,” he replied, and tried to remember the overall view of the theme park he’d seen from the air. “It seemed like the whole place is Oscillatory’s base now.”

He heard footsteps trotting up from behind, so he looked over his shoulder, wondering if Reina had forgotten something.

Wham! A shock rippled through his midsection, and he groaned. He managed to get his feet under him somehow just as he was about to fall onto his backside and looked down at a small head with marvelously red hair tied up in pigtails with black ribbons, currently embedded in his stomach. There was no mistaking who it belonged to.

“N-Niko?!”

The head jerked upward forcefully, and eyes that looked green or reddish-brown, depending on the light, were covered with a thin veil of tears. “Big Bro... I was super worried, okay!”

“Huh? Oh! Uh.” It had been a while since she’d hit him with angel mode, and his brain promptly ceased operation.

Niko, aka Yuniko Kozuki, kept her wet gaze on him for another three seconds or so before a totally different kind of grin spread across her face. She took a step back, set her hands on her hips, and said, in a voice pitched so much lower it was like she was another person, “Huh. Looking way better than I expected.”

“Haah...” Haruyuki let out a long sigh. “I’m fine. My avatar’s safe, too. And like, Niko, why are you here?”

“Why? ’Cause you messaged me.” Niko shrugged and walked over to Utai. “Sup, Maiden. Nice work this morning!”

UI> YES, YOU DID VERY WELL YOURSELF, NIKO.

“You manage to get some real sleep after that? I’m totally half-dead.”

UI> ACTUALLY, SO AM I. IT’S BASICALLY ALL C’S FAULT, THOUGH.

“Totes. Sure, he says he’s safe, but you wanna know, y’know?”

Haruyuki watched them absently as they conversed in chat and voice.

Just like Utai, Niko was in her school uniform. Short-sleeved white blouse, navy overall skirt. When he thought about it, the two of them had all kinds of things in common. They went to different schools, but they were both elementary school Burst Linkers and long-distance reds with high saturation. He figured it would end up being a precision marksmanship battle if they dueled, but he had never seen Niko and Utai go one-on-one in a normal duel.

Well, Mei's level seven and Niko's nine. They wouldn't have any reason to have a normal duel at this stage.

Niko looked at him. "So then, let's do it!"

"Huh? Do what?"

"Whoa, hey there. I told you, you're the one who messaged me!"

"Huh? Uh. Well, I guess."

Haruyuki had indeed sent Niko the message, "THE CHERRY SEEDS SPROUTED, SO I'M GOING TO TRY PLANTING THEM AT SCHOOL," while he was walking to school. But he didn't mean..."I was just reporting a fact to you. It's not like I asked you to come—"

"Uh?! I was the one who said we should keep the cherry pits an' try an' grow 'em! Meaning nothing starts until I get here!"

"I-I guess," he said, looking at Utai, but the youngest member of Nega Nebulus, the most sensible of all of them, smiled and typed in the air.

UI> I DON'T KNOW THE EXACT SEQUENCE OF EVENTS, BUT EVERYTHING IS MORE FUN TOGETHER.

"Right?! C'mon! We gotta pick a place to plant those seeds!" Niko shoved his plump stomach, and Haruyuki had no choice but to nod.

"Ooh! They got roots!" Niko cried out in delight, seeing the three seeds lined up in the cooler, while Haruyuki looked for a place to plant them.

According to what he'd found online, the general process for making seeds sprout was to use cell trays, panels with many little wells lined up alongside each other, and potting soil with a careful balance for this purpose. But he wasn't trying to mass-produce seedlings here, and he didn't know if potting soil for vegetables would be good for cherry seeds. He would just have to do a test run—or rather, a test plant—and see how they fared. He stared at the ground,

and a chat window popped up in his view.

UI> ARITA, HOW ABOUT HERE?

When he lifted his face, he saw Utai pointing at a spot at the base of the concrete wall on the southwestern side of the animal hutch. He trotted over and found several pot-type structures made of natural rock blocks that he'd never noticed before. Each was about eighty centimeters across and fifty centimeters deep. They were covered in weeds, however, which would explain why he'd never seen them even though they were fairly large.

He stood in front of the pots and looked up at the sky. Immediately to the west was the wall, so the afternoon sun would be blocked, but the area would get good sun from morning until noon. When he thought about it, he felt like the ground temperature would be too hot if the area was exposed to the sun all day in this season.

"Yeah, this could maybe be good. We'll have to clear away the weeds, though."

"We can do that in no time flat if we split the job!" Niko shouted, and then crouched and began yanking up weeds with both hands.

Even more impatient than me, huh? he thought as he joined in. Utai also began to deftly pull them up from the roots on the other side of Niko.

In a few minutes, the flower bed revealed its dark earth. The moisture and structure of the soil looked pretty good, so he dug three holes about fifteen centimeters apart and looked to his right. "Okay, you plant them, Niko."

"There's three of us, though. Let's each plant one." Niko grinned, took a seed from the cooler, and gently dropped it into the hole on the right. Haruyuki planted one in the middle, and Utai planted one on the left, and they each covered their seeds gently with soil.

He went and got a watering can from the toolshed and thoroughly watered the entire flower bed. The scent of earth and water grew thick in the air. In the Accelerated World, there were a number of tree-affinity stages like the Primeval Forest or the Grassland stage, but none of them went so far as to recreate this smell, like the life of the planet itself.

Haruyuki glanced at Niko as she stared down at the damp earth silently. “Niko,” he said softly. “I don’t mean to be pessimistic, but it really is hard to get cherry seeds to grow. Only three of the twelve even sprouted, so it’s better to think of this as a test.”

“I *know*,” she said, as if to stop him.

UI> SO IN THAT CASE, LET’S IMBUE THEM WITH OUR WILL, INCARNATE POWER.

Surprised, he looked to his left, and Utai grinned as she moved her fingers.

UI> I’M SURE THEY WILL GROW WITH THE COMBINED INCARNATES OF THREE HIGH RANKERS.

“O-oh, but I’m only level six,” he protested.

“Don’t get all humble,” Niko said, laughter in her voice, and shoved an elbow in his gut. “Your Incarnate power’s already King-class. Actually, maybe King’s an exaggeration. Executive-of-a-huge-Legion class, then.”

Executive—so Prominence’s Triplex or Great Wall’s Six Armors, or Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements. They were all a world apart from Haruyuki. He didn’t even feel like he could give them a real run for their money in a normal duel, much less with Incarnate power.

“There’s no way. None, but...” He shook his head from side to side. “But I’d be happy if they grew, too. So I’ll put all of my Incarnate into them.”

“A’right!” Niko stuck out the hand she’d removed from his side. He gripped it with his right and then clasped the hand Utai offered with his left.

As they stood there in front of the flower bed, holding hands, Haruyuki closed his eyes and prayed intently. From the bottom of his heart, he wished for the little seeds to become seedlings, to grow quick and strong, and turn into magnificent cherry trees. And for the three of them to be together like this until the day they bore fruit.

While Niko was saying hello to Hoo, Haruyuki opened the Animal Care Club log file and entered the details of their work—although naturally, he didn’t touch on the surprise attack from Niko—and uploaded it to the in-school net. They got their things together and moved to the front yard. The time was 1:40 PM, an hour and twenty minutes until the Legion general meeting.

“That reminds me. How did you get here, Niko? Pard’s motorbike?” Haruyuki asked.

The Red King bobbed her shoulders up and down. “Nah, bus. Pard’s at the shop. Said she’d take her break in time for the Legion meeting.”

“Yeah?”

The Red Legion’s second-in-command, Blood Leopard, the Bloody Kitty, aka Mihaya Kakei, was an apprentice pâtissier and waitress at the famed Western sweets shop Patisserie la Plage in Nerima Ward’s Sakuradai. Even if the high school she attended was on summer break, the shop was only closed one day a week. Mihaya had once given Haruyuki a ride on her motorbike while still in her maid-style uniform, but in general, she couldn’t slip out of the shop so easily, even on her break.

“So you’re taking the bus home, too,” he said. “I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”

“Huh?” She turned an unhappy face toward him. “I can’t come to your house? That’s what I was gonna do. I got an overnight pass from the dorm.”

“Whoa?! Again, you don’t say anything and just...My mom’s home until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Ohhh.” Niko fell silent, a strange look on her face. It was probably too much of a hurdle to jump when his mother was home, given that they’d never met. And Haruyuki didn’t know how he would explain his relationship to Niko, either.

When the two of them fell into thought, Utai cocked her head to one side before typing at the air. UI> IN THAT CASE, WOULD YOU LIKE TO STAY AT MY HOUSE, NIKO?

““Huh?””

The same interjection of doubt came from both Niko’s and Haruyuki’s mouths.

Niko blinked rapidly and pulled into herself as she asked, “B-but don’t you have parents at your place, too, Maiden?”

UI> NO, MY GRANDFATHER, PARENTS, AND OLDER BROTHER ARE ON TOUR AND WON’T BE BACK FOR A WHILE. THE ONLY PERSON AT HOME IS NANNY. IF I TELL HER I’M HAVING A FRIEND STAY OVER, IT WILL BE FINE.

“O-oh yeah?”

They'd had several opportunities to talk in the real, so Niko already knew that Utai was from a family of Noh actors. But even so, her hesitation had not been erased entirely, it seemed, given how she stammered awkwardly.

Utai watched over her for a moment, but then finally looked up at Haruyuki.

UI> SINCE WE'RE ALL TOGETHER, ANYWAY, WHY DON'T YOU COME, TOO, ARITA?

"Pwah?! M-me?!"

UI> HOW ABOUT YOU TELL YOUR MOTHER IT'S A TRAINING CAMP FOR THE ANIMAL CARE CLUB? I DO ACTUALLY HAVE SOMETHING ABOUT HOO I WANT TO DISCUSS.

Looking at the smoothly scrolling text, Haruyuki was sincerely impressed. It was true that he wouldn't be lying that way, and with this pretext, it made the whole venture feel a lot less like he was just going to hang out. He'd expect nothing less from the partner of Master Fuko, who constantly played it by ear, the power of life and death in her hands.

"Okay. In that case, it should be all right. But are you sure?"

UI>OF COURSE. I'M SURE NIKO WOULD ALSO PREFER IT THIS WAY.

Niko whapped Haruyuki on the back for some reason. "Th-that's totes not it! I just figured the more the merrier, y'know? Wohkay. It's settled. Let's get goin' already!"

After adjusting her red backpack, Niko started toward the school gates at a brisk pace. Haruyuki exchanged a brief smile with Utai before chasing after the bouncing pigtails.

“Now! We’ll give it a good tug around that tummy!”

His pudgy belly slapped, Haruyuki cried out “Heeah!” as his stomach muscles tensed. A rope wound around him from behind and was neatly tied below his belly button. The fabric that he held in his hands was yanked up and tucked in such a way as to hang down from his waist in front.

“And there we go! See? You’ve got the fighting spirit of the *fundoshi* now, hmm?” the woman said as she stood up.

She was Shiomi, the “nanny” of the Shinomiya house. In her mid-sixties or so, her slender, crane-like build was well suited to the silver-gray kimono she wore.

Haruyuki, on the other hand, was naked but for the *fundoshi* sumo underwear tied around him. When they’d gotten to the Shinomiya house in Omiya in Suginami, Utai had urged him to be the first in the bath. He’d said that he was fine going last, but naturally, he was the only one of the three of them dripping with sweat, so he hadn’t been able to refuse her offer in the end.

He’d happily washed the sweat away in the bathroom, which was wall-to-wall Japanese cypress, like a luxurious ryokan inn, but he’d found himself in trouble when he came out into the changing room. He’d been planning to head straight home after taking care of Hoo, so he hadn’t brought a change of clothes. So he’d been prepared to put his sweaty underpants and uniform back on, given that he had no other choice, but they had disappeared. As he descended into panic, a woman’s voice from outside the changing room instructed him to put on the change of clothes set out on the shelf.

The problem was that the change of clothes was a yukata. And the underclothes were a *fundoshi*, something he had never touched before in his

life.

He used his Neurolinker to look up how to tie one, at any rate, and tried to equip it by following the instructions he'd found, but then Shiomi had come in with a breezy "Excuse me" and immediately found fault with his work—"It's so baggy, too loose." And then, without giving him the chance to say a word in protest, she had immediately set about retying it for him.

The situation exceeded his brain capacity, leaving him dumbfounded, while Shiomi deftly dressed him in an indigo yukata with a mustard obi belt.

"Th-thank you," he said, and a bony hand patted his shoulder.

"You just keep having fun with Miss Utai," she instructed. It looked like she was about to say something else, too, but then closed her mouth and smiled warmly before leaving the changing room.

He blew his hair dry and then walked down the long hallway back to Utai's room, where Utai and Niko assessed his yukata self from every angle before going themselves to wash away the summer sweat. It was 2:23 PM. He felt like Chiyuri had once told him that girls take long baths, but presumably, they would be back before the meeting at three.

This was his second time in Utai's bedroom. It was very much Japanese style with the tatami mats and the sand wall finish, but even this room had air conditioning. Expensive-looking cushions sat around a small floor table. The last time, he had given up after three minutes of *seiza* position, so this time when he sat down formally on his knees, he was determined to make a better go of it.

While they were on the way here, he'd sent a mail to his mother that he had a training camp with the Animal Care Club, but she was apparently still in bed; he'd gotten no response. Since she'd left a note saying she was going to be home until the following afternoon, unusual for her, he might actually get to see her. But it seemed impossible to have a draft of his speech for the student council election ready by then—or so he thought at first, and then quickly rethought his decision. She had offered to give him notes, and he didn't want to make light of those feelings or waste the opportunity.

Still sitting on his knees, he launched the editor app on his virtual desktop. He set his fingertips on his holo keyboard and stared at the blinking cursor. But the

first word wouldn't come.

When he'd talked to her about the student council election speech, his mother had said that he should say whatever he wanted to say. When he replied that he couldn't find what he wanted to say, she'd asked him why he wanted to be a member of the council. After considering various things at some length, Haruyuki simply expressed the feelings deep in his soul:

"I just...I wanted to do something. Something I haven't been able to do before."

Smiling faintly, his mother had admonished him, *"Then you can just say that. The most important thing in a speech is how much of it reaches the hearts of the people listening. If you simply lay out some grand manifesto, it'll go in one ear and out the other."*

"How much it reaches the hearts," he muttered and moved his fingers. He touched the "I" key and hesitated slightly before pressing it. The next key. And the next. If it was a mail to a friend, he could touch-type at high speed, although he didn't begin to compare to Utai, but his movement now was awkward, like he was wearing thick gloves. Even so, he managed to get a sentence out in ten seconds, and he stared at it intently.

I HATE MYSELF.

Instantly, the voices of the majority of the students hearing this saying "Well then, work so that you like yourself" echoed in the back of his mind, and his hand reached out for the backspace. But he resisted the urge just as he was on the verge of erasing the whole thing and typed the next sentence.

I HATE MYSELF SO MUCH THAT I DON'T WANT TO LOOK AT MYSELF OR THINK ABOUT MYSELF, AND I'VE ALWAYS AVERTED MY EYES. NO MATTER WHERE I WENT OR WHAT I WAS DOING, I WAS ONLY THINKING ABOUT HOW TO NOT STAND OUT, HOW TO KEEP ANYONE FROM TALKING TO ME.

Did he really want the entire student body to hear this? If he was going to make everyone uncomfortable with a painful confession, then maybe it would be better to lay out a manifesto that was easier to listen to. But the words spilled out of him one after another.

I HAD FRIENDS WHO WERE CONCERNED ABOUT ME. BUT I COULDN'T EVEN BELIEVE IN THEM. I'VE PUSHED AWAY THE HANDS THEY'VE OFFERED ME, I'VE SAID TERRIBLE THINGS AND FLED. TO BE HONEST, EVEN AS I STAND HERE IN

FRONT OF ALL OF YOU NOW, THE CORE PART OF ME HASN'T CHANGED AT ALL. I WANT TO RUN AWAY, AND I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT I COULD BE A PART OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL. EVEN STILL...

Even still.

Even still, I wanted to change. And I was able to.

It wasn't clear where the crossroads for him had lain. The moment he received the BB program from Kuroyukihime, the moment he flew for the first time in the Accelerated World, the moment he was victorious in the fierce battle against Dusk Taker, the moment he broke free of the control of the Armor of Catastrophe, the moment he carried out the cleaning of the animal hutch, the moment he fixed the class display, or the moment when he accepted the invitation to run for student council...

There probably wasn't anything like a clear moment when everything changed. His many encounters, those many events, the many sadnesses and joys, they had changed him bit by bit by bit. The desire to face himself, to believe in himself, had slowly grown like a hard, frozen seed opening, and straightened his hunched back.

Even if, for instance, he couldn't escape from the Unlimited EK with Tezcatlipoca. Even if he lost all his points at Tokyo Grand Castle and was no longer a Burst Linker. He wouldn't lose this feeling, at least. Even if he lost his memories of the Accelerated World and returned to being plain old Haruyuki Arita, he absolutely would not walk around with his head hanging.

At some point, he had clenched his hands above his keyboard and started to reflect not on his candidacy for student council but on his mental readiness as a Burst Linker.

"Sorry to take so long!"

The sliding door was yanked open, and Haruyuki jumped, his hands in the air.

Naturally, it was Niko and Utai barging in, and like Haruyuki, they were both in yukata now. Niko's was red with a white peony pattern, while Utai's was white with blue morning glories. When Haruyuki stared at them, wowed, Niko pursed her lips, her hair pulled up into buns on either side of her head.

"Hey, Haruyuki, you could say something?"

“Huh? Oh. Y-you both look great in yukata.”

“If only you could say it without stammering.” Niko shook her head in exasperation, while beside her, Utai moved her fingers, a smile on her face.

UI> I THINK THAT’S A GOOD THING ABOUT ARITA.

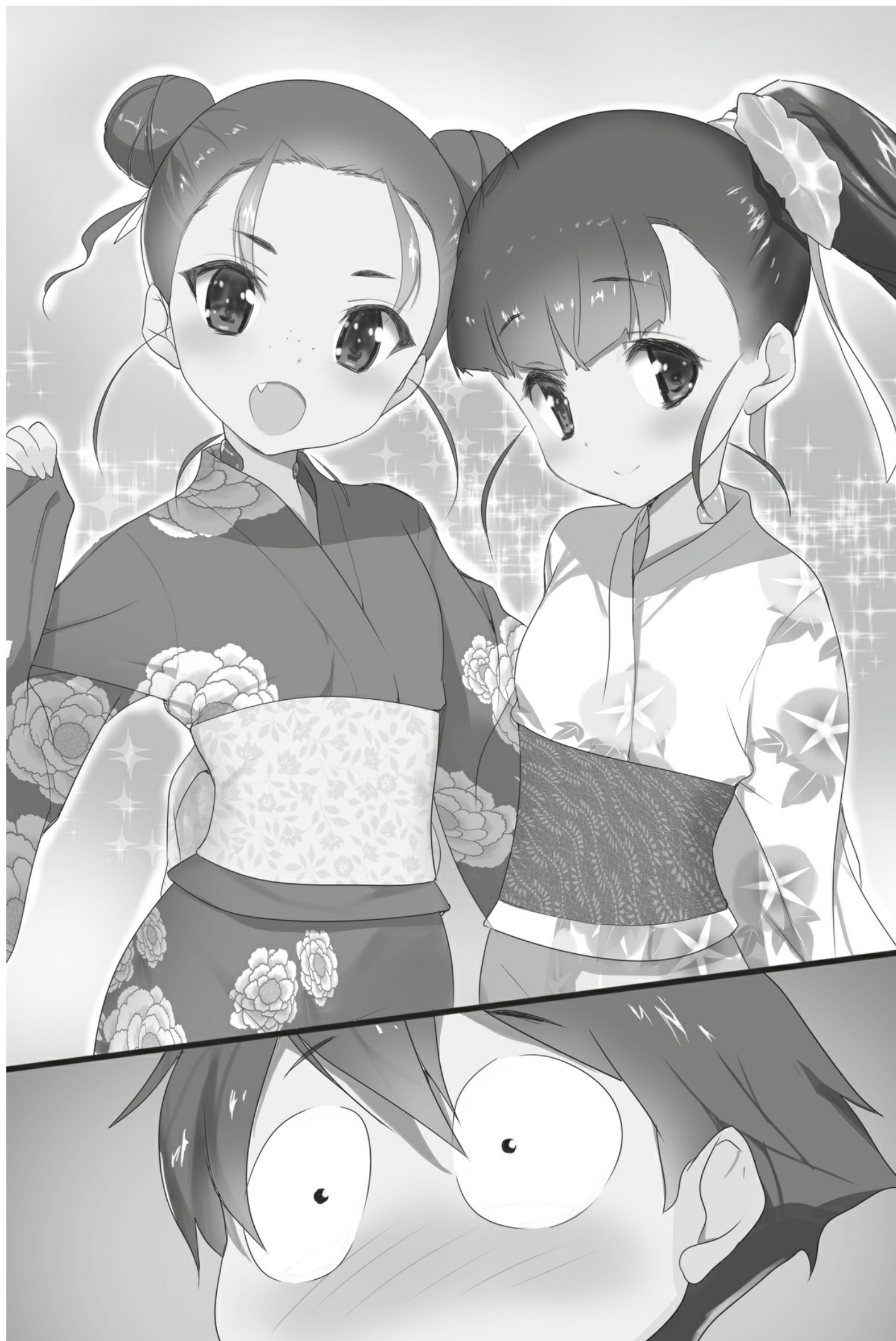
“You can’t go spoiling this guy, Maiden—I mean, Ui.”

Apparently, while they were bathing, Niko had started calling Utai “Ui.” *It’s great that they’re getting to be friends*, he thought.

Niko tugged on his hair. “Quit yer grinning. We gotta get ready to dive.”

“Huh? Oh, only three minutes left?” He saved the editor app that the girls couldn’t see and looked at Utai. “Shinomiya, did we decide whose VR we’re meeting in?”

UI> YES, SACCHI MESSAGED AND SAID THAT FU WOULD BE THE HOST, AS SHE WAS WITH THE INTI STRATEGY MEETING.



“Huh. Oh, really?” At some point, the message icon in the notifications area of his virtual desktop had started flashing. He’d apparently been so focused on his speech that he had missed the arrival of the message from Kuroyukihime. He looked it over, at any rate, and then turned his eyes down at the cushion he was sitting on. “Um. It’s not an accelerated meeting, so if we dive while sitting, we might fall over.”

UI> THAT’S TRUE. PLEASE WAIT A MOMENT, Utai typed before opening the closet and pulling out something that looked like a blanket. UI> I’M SORRY TO ASK YOU TO USE THE CUSHIONS AS PILLOWS, BUT LET’S PUSH THE TABLE ASIDE AND ALL LIE DOWN.

“Huh?”

“No point in getting all weird about it at this stage of the game. ‘Sides, we got no time!”

Niko yanked on his hair again, and Haruyuki hurriedly got to his feet. He lifted the table and moved it to the spot near the wall that Utai had indicated. All three of them lay down in the now-open space, spread the blanket across their stomachs, and they were ready to go with just ten seconds left.

“Hey, Haru,” Niko called out from the other side of Utai, and Haruyuki looked to his right. “Whatever the sitch, we’re totes gonna get you outta it. No worries, just tell it like it is.”

“...Right” was all he had time to say in response. Two seconds before three o’clock, Haruyuki and Niko threw their minds into a virtual world through voice commands, while Utai tapped at her desktop.

““Direct Link!””

The moment Haruyuki dived into Fuko's VR space, transformed into his pink pig avatar, he let out a cry just like he had the last time: "He-hyeeee!"

He'd anticipated appearing on top of the massive whale swimming through the sky—her name was Thalassa—but he'd landed on the very edge of the wooden deck on the whale's back, in a spot where he would plunge into the virtual sky if he took a single misstep. He waved his arms wildly to try to regain his balance, and a hand stretched out from behind to pinch his pointed pig ear. He was suddenly yanked up into the air and wrapped in soft cushions.

"You're all right, Corvus. Even if you did fall, the space is set to teleport you back after you've fallen a hundred meters."

Haruyuki turned his head at this to find he was being held by the host of this VR space, Fuko. Like last time, she was dressed up like a teacher in a white blouse and rimless glasses. Which meant that it wasn't cushions pressing up against his back, but rather—

No, no, no, VR, VR, VR, he chanted to himself while he said aloud, "Wh-why is it set like that? If you just made a transparent wall around the deck, no one would fall in the first place."

"I've always hated invisible walls in 3D games."

"W-well, me too, actually, but," he replied, still held to her chest.

"Hmph. You look quite comfortable, hmm, Haruyuki?"

"Y-yeah, well, I mean, of c— Whoa!" The instant he saw the owner of the voice, he shuddered with his whole body.

Standing to the right, in front of Fuko, Kuroyukihime was clad in her usual

black-spangle-butterfly dress. She thrust her closed parasol into the ground with both hands like a sword, a smile on her face that was one step away from the ultimate chill of the Kuroyukihime Smile.

“Goodness! Did you want to hug him, too, Sacchi?” Fuko asked, and Kuroyukihime turned her face away with a sniff.

“My avatar does not have the same *cushioning* as yours, Fuko. Even if I were to hold him, it would not be comfortable.”

“Huh? It’s an avatar, though, so can’t you customize however you—” The instant Haruyuki started to speak, her left hand shot out at lightning speed, and she clamped onto his pig nose with her thumb and index finger.

“Oi, Haruyuki. Is it that a *boy* cannot understand the pointlessness of bestowing a chest on your avatar more generous than that of your real-world self?”

“Hh-hyah.” With extreme pressure on his nose, Haruyuki nodded slightly, and laughter rose from the group around them.

The Petit Paquet group of Shihoko, Satomi, and Yume were giggling alongside Utai and Niko, who had dived at the same time as he had, together with Chiyuri and Rin; while even the ever-cool Rui, Pard, and Akira in her otter avatar, were breaking into grins.

Her face slightly red, Kuroyukihime released his pig nose, and Fuko moved—still holding Haruyuki—to the front of Thalassa’s deck, before setting him down on top of the podium-like desk there.

Even while she was doing this, new avatars were appearing one after another in the VR space. The boy in the black suit with the deer head was Cassis Moose, one of the former Prominence’s Triplex; the girl in the red dress with the porcupine head was Thistle Porcupine, also Triplex; the cute idol-like girl in the red bolero and miniskirt was Blaze. The old-school robot avatar was Takumu, the masked avatar in an *eboshi* hat and the *noshi* dress of a Heian-era noble was Trilead, and the last to appear was an animal avatar about a meter tall in a blue kimono and black *hakama* trousers. The long, slender body resembled Akira’s otter, but the muzzle was tapered, so maybe it was a weasel.

Who is that? Haruyuki racked his brain, trying to remember.

Walking over to the podium, long kimono swinging, the weasel looked up at him and raised its whiskers in a grin. “Oh-ho. *This* is thy VR avatar, then? Fairly endearing, is it not?”

“M-Maestro!” he cried out, and when he looked with that thought in mind, he realized that the blue of the kimono, with just a little purple mixed in, was the color of Centaurea.

Even though this was the first appearance of the newest member of Nega Nebulus, Seri Suzukawa, on the back of the flying whale, she showed absolutely no sign of panic whatsoever as she looked back at the group lined up from edge to edge. “Oi, Crow. Are you not going to introduce us?”

“Oh. R-right. Um, except for Rain and Pard, I think this is your first time meeting the members of Prominence. And Lead, too. This is Centaurea Sentry. She joined the Legion today.”

“Whaaa—?!” Cassis Moose and Thistle Porcupine leapt back immediately, so forcefully that they dropped off the level deck. Watching as they tumbled down the slippery slope of the whale’s back, Haruyuki sent up a silent prayer.

They waited for the two Prominence members to be restored, and then the first Legion meeting in two days began.

After a few quick words from Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki was given the floor. It wasn’t an accelerated meeting, so their time was limited. He had to communicate as efficiently and truthfully as possible the situation into which Silver Crow had been placed and everything the White King had told him. He closed his eyes briefly and got his head sorted before beginning to speak from the top of the podium.

Seven minutes later.

“Um, so having said all that,” he finished, “there’s a possibility that part or all of what the White King told me about the Accelerated World and Tezcatlipoca is a lie. I think we have to keep in mind that this is maybe false information to manipulate us.”

“Mmm. You’re exactly right.” Kuroyukihime stepped forward and thanked

Haruyuki gently, “Nice work, Crow.” She turned to look at the group. “White Cosmos would not disclose information out of the goodness of her heart, with no ulterior motive. We should assume that the majority of what she says is to manipulate. On the other hand, I can’t see any obvious contradictions to the information we’ve obtained ourselves up to this point.”

Fuko and Pard nodded to back this statement up.

Tezcatlipoca was an execution device to end this world. For those in the group who had experienced firsthand the singular power of this giant, it was impossible to completely denounce the White King’s words.

“Tezcatlipoca, hmm?” Centaurea Sentry said, casually, as if to try and ease the tension and break the silence that fell over them, being the only one there who had not taken part in the battle. “So that flaming ball held such a thing inside of it.” The kimono-clad weasel stepped out in front of the podium and crossed her arms. “Well, it must be faced now that it has come out of its shell. The question of the meaning of its existence is secondary at the moment. What must be done now is not to untangle the mysteries of the Accelerated World but rather regain the stolen Crow, yes?”

“That’s true.” The first to respond was Blaze Heart of the old Prominence. A member of Heliosphere, the second or third top idol group in the Accelerated World, she had a fierce and passionate soul in contrast with her adorable appearance. She had also broken the cease-fire between the Legions and attacked the Suginami area. At the last meeting, she had announced to Kuroyukihime that she hadn’t forgiven her for sending Red Rider to total point loss, so she likely had ill feelings in her heart about the merger of Nega Nebulus and Prominence, and yet she let no sign of that show in her attitude as she continued speaking.

“Our ultimate objective is to kick the White King and her minions to the curb and ensure that Oscillatory and the Acceleration Research Society don’t cause any more chaos in the Accelerated World. And make them pay for all their evil deeds. For that, we definitely need Silver Crow. We gotta get him out and move onto the next stage!”

“Yeah!” Niko slapped her fist into her open palm and made her princely

avatar take a step forward. “No matter how strong that big thing is, they can’t bring it into normal duels or the Territories. Once we can get Crow back, we attack the White territory with the combined forces of the six—no, five—Legions and bring the Legion to its doom. Meeeeaning we gotta start focusing on rescuing Crow and *think!*”

These were truly the words of a king, rousing the spirits of all those who heard them, and cries of “All right!” and “Yeah!” rose from the meeting participants.

The instant this clamor died down, a calm voice came from the rear of the group.

“In that case, there’s only one way to proceed.” Takumu stood up, his voice cool but girded with a hidden fire. “It’ll be difficult to destroy Tezcatlipoca with a direct attack. If we make one mistake, someone else—maybe several someones—might end up in Unlimited EK. But the White King faces the same basic danger there.”

Chiyuri, in her cat-eared avatar, had listened silently up to that point, and now she cried out, “Right! We just have to release the taming! Then Tezcatlipoca’ll stop listening to the White King’s orders, and we can create an opening for Crow to escape!”

“Mm-hmm, exactly. But...” Takumu trailed off, and Trilead, beside him, picked up the thought.

“To undo the taming, we have to destroy the Luminary crowns that bind the Enemy. But on top of the fact that there are now six of them, we must also assume that as with Inti, they have been enhanced to nullify flame and physical attacks. Essentially.”

The assembled Burst Linkers began to whisper and murmur at this.

It was true that Tezcatlipoca would no longer obey the White King’s orders if they could destroy the crowns. And judging from their experience thus far, once freed from the Luminary’s control, Enemies were rendered immobile for at least three seconds. If Haruyuki flew at full speed, that was plenty of time for him to escape the range of the gravity attack.

But just as Lead noted, destroying the crowns after they'd been enhanced by the blacksmith would be no easy feat. It was exactly because they hadn't been able to do this with Inti that Haruyuki had cut into the main body with Omega style. How were they supposed to destroy the crowns when they repelled both physical and flame attacks?

"And we can't say for sure about electrical attacks or ice, either," Teacher Fuko noted, standing to the right of the podium, and several people nodded deeply.

"So then there's only one answer. We'll just have to use Incarnate techniques. We couldn't with Inti because just approaching to cut the crown with Incarnate would have burned up both the Enhanced Armament and the user of the technique, but Tezcatlipoca has no damage field. If we could approach at super-high speed and destroy the crowns in a single blow..."

"However, Raker." The weasel jumped up onto the podium, pulled out a miniature traditional metal tobacco pipe from the breast of her kimono, and waved it lightly like a sword. "It is not such a simple matter as you say to cut with Incarnate an object that is impervious to physical damage. Additionally, from what we are hearing here, we must cut these six crowns or what have you simultaneously, yes? Are you able to bring together six such skilled swords?"

"There's one right here," Kuroyukihime said immediately, thrusting her parasol down onto the deck with a loud sound, and everyone stared at her.

"Y-you can't!" Haruyuki cried out, and several other voices of the same opinion joined his.

"Lotus, the Inti mission was originally to free you from an Unlimited EK," Fuko said in a reprimanding tone. "If you end up in Unlimited EK once again, we'll be going around in circles."

"So then it's fine as long as I don't, yes? I've seen Tezcatlipoca's gravitational wave attack already. I won't be done in by the same technique twice."

"Nooooo!" Fuko protested. "We will choose our six attackers from those who are *not* kings!"

"Hmph." Kuroyukihime was still not entirely convinced, but Utai in her shrine

maiden avatar gently patted her hand, and thus pacified by their youngest member, even the Black King had no choice but to agree.

Haruyuki let out a sigh of relief as a husky male voice reached his ears.

“In that case, we can’t put Vanquish—the Blue King—into consideration.”

The speaker was Cassis Moose, massive horns growing from his deer head. He walked as he continued, his shiny black leather shoes clacking against the deck. “The best sword user in Promi is Tranquil, aka Lavender Downer. But it’s unclear whether she wields an Incarnate technique powerful enough to cut through physical immunity. Of the other Legions, the first ones that come to mind are the Leonids’ Dualis, GW’s Viridian Decurion, Oscillatory’s Platinum Cavalier... who is obviously not an option. And then...”

Cassis Moose crossed his arms and groaned.

“But like, there’s the three right in front of us here,” the porcupine-headed Thistle Porcupine interjected.

Her finger was first pointed at the Heian noble avatar in his porcelain-like mask, Trilead Tetroxide. Now that she mentioned it, she was exactly right. Although Trilead didn’t have a nickname yet, with his Arc, Infinity, and his Incarnate technique, Heavenly Stratus, he was one of the most powerful sword users Haruyuki knew of.

Thistle’s finger next turned to the very person who had spoken up to propose the destruction of the crowns, Takumu.

“H-huh?” he said, stunned.

“I totally saw you in the mission this morning.” Thistle began to speak at top speed in a super-squeaky voice. “Your technique with that sword you borrowed from Crow was bananas! You’re always clanking along with that Pile Driver, but your real calling is as a sword user!”

Which reminded Haruyuki—Takumu still had Lucid Blade. What exactly was going to happen there?

“N-no, my true calling is the Pile Driver,” Takumu protested in a panic. “Just producing a sword is my limit with Incarnate techniques.”

“That’s plenty good enough!” Thistle snapped and pointed at the weasel avatar next to Haruyuki. “And then you! Ruthless, Asura, Omega Weapon, aka Centaurea Sentry! I got a million things I wanna ask you, like where you been all this time and when exactly did you join Nega Nebulus, but when it comes to the sword, you’re tops in the Accelerated World. In other words, these three plus Coba-Manga and Decurion, and we got our six!”

“Ooh!” The Petit Paquet group, Chiyuri, and Rin let out a cry of admiration and clapped.

That group could actually get the job done, Haruyuki said to himself.

“A moment.” Seri spun the pipe in her hand and pointed the silver bowl at Lead and Takumu in turn. “We shall have a look at the skills of these youngsters in due course. But Dualis and Decurion cause some concern.”

“Oh? And why is that?” Kuroyukihime asked, and the weasel shrugged lightly.

“Coba-Manga follow in the Infinite style of Blue Knight, yes? As far as we know, Knight is cautious when it comes to Incarnate. Even if he were to guide his apprentices in the way of Incarnate, there’s a strong possibility that he would stop at the first level.”

“That may be,” Kuroyukihime replied. “Blue Knight hates the dark side of Incarnate more than anything.”

Fuko and Akira nodded their agreement.

“Next, Decurion.” Seri gave her frank opinion of the second seat of Great Wall’s Six Armors. “Given that he is indeed a fine sword user, his Incarnate technique level will be more or less adequate. But he is somewhat incompatible with this mission. Because his sword technique has the counter as its foundation, as Green Grandé does.”

“Aah,” Fuko murmured.

“Decurion’s technique has its origin in the buckler on his left hand. Guard, swing, guard, swing—he creates a rhythm in this manner and then launches the killing blow. We have not ever seen him launch a full-powered attack at first swing,” Sentry said, and given that she was perhaps the most veteran of all the powerful warriors gathered there, no one could say a word in argument. Only

the sound of the wind whispered faintly.

“But,” Utai said, finally, in a quiet voice, “is there anyone else who might be appropriate?”

Seri turned her tapered muzzle to the left. “Lavender Downer, mentioned by this moose head earlier. Although we were unaware they had joined the Red Legion. Tranquil is good for the fourth attacker.”

“Wh-what?” Cassis Moose cried out in surprise. “Are you saying quiet, reserved Lavy’s a better fighter than Coba-Manga or Decurion?”

Seri grinned at him. “Dear boy, are you in love?”

“N-no!”

“Well, either way. If it is the same Lavender we once knew, then she is in a different dimension from Coba-Manga. Arrange for us to meet in the coming days. We turn to the fifth attacker.” Seri looked at Fuko to her right. “That twisty little fellow who was in Aurora Oval—Strongest Name, is he still alive?”

Fuko raised an eyebrow at this question. “Strongest...Crikin? Err, I feel like Lotus mentioned that name a while ago.”

All eyes turned to Kuroyukihime, and she nodded with the same curious expression on her face.

“Mmm. I saw him six months or so ago. I’d just assumed he went off and lost all his points somewhere, but he apparently moved quite far away from Tokyo because of family circumstances.”

“Aha, retirement due to relocation.” Seri nodded knowingly. “For all intents and purposes, normal duels and Enemy hunting can really only be done in the twenty-three wards of Tokyo and their environs. Normally, a player gradually uses up their points and ends up at total loss, but Crikin was still in good health?”

“Mmm. It seems he made the cousin he lives with his child and then had her make her own child. The three of them have been hunting Enemies ever since.”

“Ha-ha-ha!” Seri laughed with delight. “Tenacious. Very much like him.”

“Um, what’s this Crikin person like?” Haruyuki asked timidly. “I feel like I’ve

heard Strongest Name somewhere before.”

Fuko smiled. “Corvus, you fought someone with a similar nickname at the Prominence merger meeting, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Oh! Stronger Name! Iodine Sterilizer!” he shouted, before replaying the memory from three days earlier. “Right, you said so then, Master Fuko. Iodine fought with another Burst Linker over a different nickname and lost. And he became Stronger because he lost. So then the name he was fighting for was Strongest Name...He was up against this Crikin?”

Fuko and Seri both nodded at the same time. But right away, a doubtful voice came from among the meeting participants.

“But the name Crikin doesn’t sound strong at aaaalll.”

The speaker was Yume Yuruki of the Petit Paquet group, Plum Flipper. Satomi Mito/Mint Mitten and Shihoko/Chocolat Puppeteer standing to either side of her also bobbed their heads up and down. Instantly, the senior Linkers burst out laughing.

Once this died down, Pard explained, “Crikin’s a nickname. His full name is Crimson Kingbolt.”

Cool. And it sounds strong. Just on the strength of his name alone, that fight with Iodine Sterilizer must have been a good one. Haruyuki nodded to himself.

“But, like,” came a voice from the center of the front row—it was Niko in her prince costume. She took two steps forward, the heels of her boots clacking, and stared hard at Seri. “I’ve heard the name of this Crikin guy at least. He used to boast he had the most powerful long-distance firepower in the Accelerated World ’fore I came along? Dunno if that’s true, but strongest firepower means he’s a pistol-type or whatevs? C’n he use a sword?”

“Yes, that’s it right there,” Kuroyukihime agreed. “I’ve fought against and alongside Crikin any number of times, but when he turns into a robot, he goes blast on the long-distance firepower. I’ve never once seen him use a sword. Sentry, are you sure you’re not thinking of someone else?”

“R-robot?”

Ignoring Haruyuki's question, Seri turned her pipe on Kuroyukihime. "Oi, Lotus, do not treat us as though we are old simply because of the way we speak. How could I be mistaken? Crikin, you see, he was troubled."

"Tr-troubled?" Kuroyukihime raised an eyebrow. "That carefree twist top?"

"Insofar as we are Burst Linkers, we all have some angst hidden in our hearts," Seri pointed out in a ponderous tone, and Kuroyukihime pursed her lips and lowered her eyes.

It was exactly as Seri said. Duel avatars were generated using mental trauma as the mold. Thus, every time a Burst Linker accelerated, they were forced to confront their own weakness, their own ugliness. There were no exceptions to this, no matter how cool or beautiful the avatar might be.

Turning toward the silent assembly, Seri began quietly, "Crikin put forth tremendous effort and located our home in the Unlimited Neutral Field and waited at length before the front gate for us to appear. When we finally did, he revealed the depths his heart. He had always felt some *lack* in himself when he became a robot."

"Lack?" the Black King asked. "When he had such tremendous firepower?"

"Silence," the weasel commanded. "To wit, the main armament of a Japanese super-robot should have been a massive sword. He said that no matter how he wielded lasers and missiles and cannons, he was too embarrassed to name himself a super-robot without a giant sword. Having said this, he wept manly tears."

"..."

Once again, the entire assembly was silent.

After a full five seconds, Kuroyukihime looked at Fuko. "Raker, which way is southwest?"

"What? Um. Thalassa is set to always fly due west, so that way...I suppose."

"Thanks." Kuroyukihime turned in the direction that Fuko had pointed, took a deep breath, and leaned back as far as she could go. "Sooooooooo stuuuuuuupid! Crikin, you idiot! That is sooooooooo duuuuuuuuumb!!"

Seri's monologue had drained the life out of everyone present, causing knees to buckle in exasperation, so Fuko generated enough chairs for them all and served drinks while she was at it before the meeting recommenced.

Seated next to Haruyuki by the edge of the podium, Seri took a sip of tea from her weasel-sized cup and resumed her telling of the legend of Crimson Kingbolt.

"Well, all of that is to say, I too thought Crimson was deeply 'stupid,' so we refused to accept him as an apprentice with every bone in our body. But I did impart to him the technique for changing a firearm into a sword with Incarnate alone. Transforming the shape of an Enhanced Armament is an Incarnate technique of the first quadrant, Attack Power Expansion, and thus, if one does not stint on time and effort, it is possible to acquire under one's own power. That said, however, well, I did assume it was impossible. But a few months later, Crikin visited our home once more and revealed the Incarnate technique he had learned. He transformed all the robot weapons into one absurdly massive sword and split one of the maddeningly hard buildings of the Demon City stage in one stroke. Although immediately after that, he was ripped apart by Enemies drawn to the scent of Incarnate, since he was unable to move because of the massive energy expenditure this required. At any rate, that kind of power should be able to cut the Luminary crown. And so long as he has enough time, he could transform safely into a robot in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Which is to say, Crikin would be a good fifth attacker."

"I see." Kuroyukihime now nodded with a serious look on her face. "If he could cut a building in the Demon City stage, then it does indeed seem hopeful. But, unfortunately, he moved to Okinawa. We can't exactly invite him to drop by with a quick message."

Hearing this, the entire party let out a sigh as one.

Starting at the beginning of the 2040s, space planes had been introduced to fly above the atmosphere at supersonic speeds on international routes connecting major cities internationally. But domestic routes, including Tokyo–Naha, still only used conventional jets. Haruyuki did a quick search and found that flights were two and a half hours and cost just under twenty thousand yen for a return trip, even with a discount carrier. Just as Kuroyukihime noted, this wasn't a distance or financial investment that allowed them to give him a quick

shout to come over.

He remembered the fierce battle with Dusk Taker three months earlier. Kuroyukihime had been in Okinawa on a school trip at the time, but she had taken part in that final battle by unexpectedly traveling through the Unlimited Neutral Field. He was sure that this school trip was also where she had been reunited with Crimson Kingbolt. In which case, couldn't they do the same thing here?

"Um. What about having Crikin come to Tokyo through the Unlimited Neutral Field?" Haruyuki proposed timidly.

"I was thinking the same thing," Kuroyukihime said with a groan. "Coming from Okinawa, however, you have no choice but to cross the ocean. And even if he reached the island of Kyushu somehow, it wouldn't take days but rather months to reach Tokyo on foot."

"What if we tamed an Enemy that could fly like Cavalier did?" Fuko suggested.

Kuroyukihime groaned again. "While there are flying Enemies that can be ridden in the Okinawa area, taming one requires a rare Enhanced Armament. I have one, so there's the possibility of readying a flying Enemy here and sending it to pick him up. But the trip takes three hours each way, and bird-type Enemies will come to attack en route. The majority are lesser class, so disposing of them alone is possible, but even a high ranker risks dying if tangled up with several of them."

"Um." Rin raised her hand. She was wearing a leather jacket with tons of rivets and ripped jeans with holes all over the place. She spoke in a timid tone that did not match the punk look at all. "For this mission. The other. Four Legions are. Going to help, us right?"

Kuroyukihime and Fuko exchanged a glance and then nodded at the same time.

"They should," Fuko, Rin's parent, replied. "I don't think that even Yellow Radio would say he doesn't care what happens to Corvus, when he put in the most work, so long as he is safe."

"So then how about. All the Legions split the cost of. Crikin's travel expenses?"

Even if it's thirty thousand yen, including money for his stay, if we divide that among a hundred people. It's three hundred yen. Per person, and we could probably. Take that from. Our allowances?"

"Mmm. Well, I suppose so." Fuko sounded unusually evasive. "For the attack on Tokyo Midtown last month, a similar proposal was made, that we rent a room at the top of the tower and dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field from there. Now that I'm thinking of it, one night there was also thirty thousand yen, hmm? But in the end, the proposal wasn't adopted. It's long been seen as taboo to resolve problems in the Accelerated World with real money, for Legions to extract real money from members, no matter how small the amount, or to earn real money in the Accelerated World."

"Well, every veteran and master is just a schoolchild once the avatar is peeled away, after all," Seri said, and the entire group sighed. "Naturally, there've been some among the Burst Linkers who tried to earn spending money with the power of acceleration, but in most cases, this invites unfortunate results. Regrettably, we may have to abandon the idea of Crikin as the fifth attacker."

If only I could do the flying, Haruyuki couldn't help but think.

It was entirely pointless, given that he was in an Unlimited EK, but if he could fly in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he could make it all the way to Okinawa, however hard it might be, and return with Crimson Kingbolt on his back. Even if he exhausted his flight ability gauge, with his Incarnate power and the wings he'd gotten from Metatron, he could make the trip of 1,550 kilometers each way without having to touch down on the ground once.

"Aah!" He let out a small cry. Seri, Kuroyukihime, and Fuko turned to look at him.

"Oh. Um," he started, looking at each of them in turn. "I was just thinking that it wouldn't be hard for Metatron to fly back and forth to Okinawa. She talked about going to Mount Fuji like it was just around the corner."

"Metatron?" A suspicious look rose on Seri's weasel face. "Is there a Legion member with such a name?"

"Oh, right. You haven't met her yet, have you? She's not a Burst Linker. She's a Saint, the last boss of the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth. Some stuff

happened, and now she's a member of Nega Nebulus."

"..."

Seri opened her eyes ever so slightly wider and was silent for about two seconds before grinning ruefully. "Is that so? This makes several points come into focus, then. So you were the contractor then, Crow..."

"C-contractor? What's that?"

"Leave that for now. At any rate, you can summon the main body of the Archangel Metatron in the Unlimited Neutral Field, then? Rather than ask her to play the role of taxi, we may simply have her as the fifth."

Seri's words shook Fuko, Kuroyukihime, and the other Legion members.

Haruyuki was stunned for a second, too, before he hurriedly flapped his hands. "N-no! But Metatron doesn't have a sword or anything! And I don't think she can use Incarnate attacks."

"We will lend her a blade. And if she is a Legend-class Enemy, then she can implement an attack equal to our own third-quadrant Incarnate techniques, should she so desire. Because she and her kind are connected to the Highest Level."

"...!" He gasped sharply as a scene from the past came back to life in his mind.

When Graphite Edge had been lecturing them on third-quadrant Incarnate techniques inside the Castle, Metatron had said that the third quadrant was nothing more than directly interfering with information from the Highest Level. If she could see through the logic, then it might actually be possible for her to use it. But there was one other major issue in asking Metatron to be an attacker.

"Um, that's...", Haruyuki said, taking care not to accidentally link to her. "In the fight with the White Legion, Metatron lost everything except her core information. Right now, she's recovering at Master Raker's in Fufuan in a state of total sleep. If I called her, she would wake up, but if possible, I'd rather not do that until her recovery is one hundred percent complete."

"Hmm," Seri said, a thoughtful look on her face.

“Crow, I feel the same way,” Kuroyukihime announced crisply. “Metatron has saved the Legion in crisis several times now. Even if it is for a mission to rescue you yourself, I don’t want to push her to that extreme again.”

“Okay!” Haruyuki said.

“Crow, when is this recovery expected to be complete?” Seri asked.

“Huh? Um. She said three days, during the evening two days ago. So maybe around tomorrow evening?”

“Well then, there is no issue, is there? The preparations for the mission will likely take that long.”

“Oh.”

Now that she mentioned it, that was exactly right—to get the six attackers together, pin down the details of the strategy, and set up the support troops would require coordination with the other Legions; they couldn’t exactly just charge off that very evening. In fact, the next evening was almost too soon.

Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down, and Seri nodded slightly in return, spinning the pipe in her hand.

“In which case, the fifth attacker will be the Archangel Metatron. At last we come to our final selection. It’s already a foregone conclusion that it would be him.”

Normally, he would reflexively ask “Who?” but this time, at least, even Haruyuki understood who. If they were talking about sword users in the Accelerated World, then the one name that should have come up straightaway still had not been mentioned.

Apparently having long assumed the same, Kuroyukihime and Fuko sighed together. But neither of them moved to speak, so Haruyuki was about to give the answer when a voice came from ahead of him.

“My master,” Trilead said. “The Anomaly, Graphite Edge, yes?”

“Oh-ho!” Seri said, surprised. “Did Graph take a student other than Lotus? Trilead, was it? Then you are also a user of Ain style?”

“No.” Trilead lowered his white mask and shook his head. “I am unable to

completely master two swords.”

“Mmm?” Seri raised an eyebrow. “There are also single sword techniques in Ain style, however?”

“Yes, my master also told me that, but two sword techniques are truly the essence of the Ain style. I would prefer to hone my techniques with one sword.”

“We see, understood. At any rate, if that is the case, even Graph would not refuse the role of attacker. After all, his student is risking his life to save his grandchild.”

Grandchild?

Haruyuki almost furrowed his brow at this, but then realized she was talking about him. The dual sword technique Ain style that Graphite Edge used had been passed onto Kuroyukihime, and Haruyuki was Kuroyukihime’s child and student, so that essentially made Graphite Edge his grandfather in terms of sword school generations. But then would Haruyuki also have to equip himself with two swords in order to study the Ain style?

He glanced over at Kuroyukihime, but her face in profile, lips tightly pursed, looked as though she were far away, perhaps peering into the distant past, and he couldn’t bring himself to say anything to her.

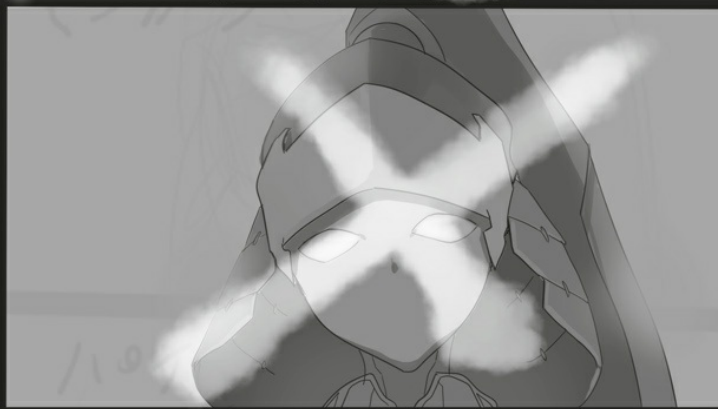
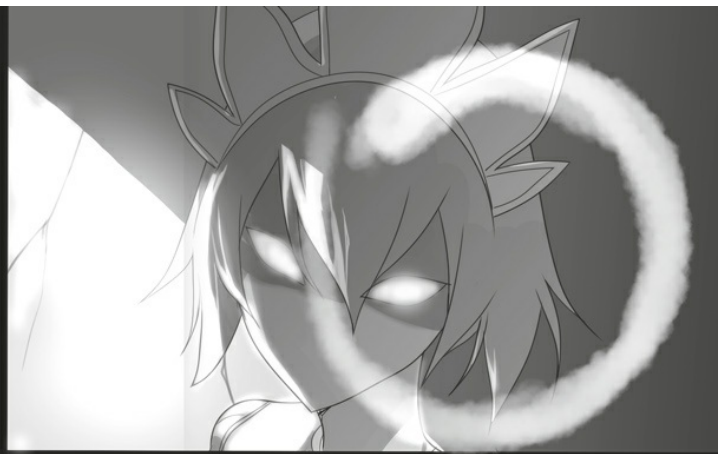
“However.”

Haruyuki heard Trilead’s voice and brought his mind back to the world in front of him.

“To ask my master to take on the attacker role, we must resolve an issue as difficult as that with Metatron—no, perhaps even more so.”

“And that is?” Seri replied.

After a moment’s hesitation, Trilead straightened up and said, “At present, Graphite Edge is locked in the Castle.”



Waking up from the full dive, Haruyuki stared up at the unfamiliar wooden ceiling and wondered where he was. But he quickly remembered that this was Utai's room, and he let out a short sigh.

The current time was...4:08 PM. That meant that the meeting had ended in just over an hour, but he felt like he'd been diving for three times that long. Although, since the VR space had been on top of a flying whale, "dive" wasn't quite the right word for it. And why did they call it "diving" anyway? Who had been the first person to use that expression for virtual worlds...

As these thoughts wandered through his mind, Utai, who was lying to his right, moved her hands on top of the blanket.

UI> C.

Not "Arita," but "C." He waited a few seconds, but she typed nothing more, so he turned his head toward her.

When he did, the girl he could see through the chat window spelled out words unusually slowly, a vast light in her eyes, even though they were turned toward the ceiling.

UI> DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU ENTERED THE CASTLE WITH ME?

"Yeah, of course."

There was no way he could forget. The mission to rescue Ardor Maiden from where she was sealed at the south gate of the Castle, which was guarded by the God Suzaku, had been carried out in June—he was pretty sure it had been on the eighteenth. With some help from Sky Raker, he had charged onto the large bridge that led to the south gate at what had been his top speed at the time. Although he managed to pick up Ardor Maiden when she appeared, he had

been unable to shake the fierce pursuit of Suzaku from behind, and so he had kept going right through the south gate.

That was the first time he'd broken into the Castle. He had encountered Trilead Tetroxide there and learned a great number of things. And now, even a month later, the dazzling red of the leaves falling on the grounds of the Castle's Heian stage returned to him vividly whenever he closed his eyes.

Perhaps waiting for him to call up the memory, Utai now displayed new text in the chat window. UI> THERE, I SHOWED YOU AN INCARNATE TECHNIQUE FROM THE FOURTH QUADRANT, A DESTRUCTIVE INCARNATE.

"Uh-huh." He also remembered this clearly. To crush a powerful sentinel Enemy, Utai had transformed the ground into a magma bog, a terrifying technique indeed. "You said that technique was...developed to use on the God Genbu, right?"

UI> YES. THE TIME TO USE THE FULL POWER OF THAT TECHNIQUE HAS FINALLY COME.

Having typed these gallant words, Utai's hands tightened into balls, as if to fire herself up.

That night at ten o'clock, Nega Nebulus would recruit support from the other Great Legions and take on the fight with the God Genbu, which guarded the north gate of the Castle.

The ultimate goal of the mission was to rescue Graphite Edge, who was locked inside the Castle. In other words, they didn't have to crush Genbu; they just had to prevent it from doing anything until Graph had crossed the bridge over the moat. But naturally, this would be no easy task. Genbu had the greatest defensive power of the Four Gods and possessed a shell that resisted even Graph's twin blades Lux and Umbra, and he was the most powerful sword wielder in the Accelerated World.

Thus, given that she had already developed an Incarnate technique specifically for use on Genbu, Utai would be part of the main attacking group in the fight against the God. However, after she activated her fourth-quadrant Incarnate in the Castle, she had collapsed, unable to withstand the mental load. The power of the technique that would be required this time didn't compare with the scale then. He couldn't even imagine what kind of burden would be

placed on her mind.

He wanted to help her. He wanted to cover her with the full force of a positive Incarnate, standing beside her as she used a powerful negative one. But he couldn't. He was trapped in an Unlimited EK at Tokyo Grand Castle, so he wasn't going to be able to take part in the mission on Genbu. Tortured by an unprecedented sense of powerlessness and frustration, Haruyuki tightened his hands on the edge of the blanket.

That was what Unlimited EK meant: No matter how difficult an objective his comrades took on in the Unlimited Neutral Field, the true form of the Accelerated World, he couldn't be a part of it. Utai, when she was sealed at the Suzaku gate; Akira, when she was sealed at the Seiryu gate; Kuroyukihime, when she was swallowed up by the Sun God Inti—they must have felt this same way.

Haruyuki finally understood, not with his head but with his heart, the true severity of the situation into which he had been placed.

If the mission to rescue him failed late tomorrow night or, at the very latest, early morning the day after tomorrow, the White Legion would no doubt put some kind of measures in place, so it would become much more difficult for him to escape the Unlimited EK. He might not be able to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field for weeks or months—or maybe, like Utai and Akira, for years—of real time. Normal duels were possible, and he could take part in the Territories on the weekend, but he would no longer be able to go hunting Enemies with his comrades, or talk endlessly while looking out at the view, or fly free in the sky of the borderless Accelerated World.

Nor, of course, fight alongside his comrades as they faced death.

Tears threatened to spring from his eyes at his frustration and fear.

“Hey, Haruyuki, c'mere.”

He looked to his right and saw that Niko, on the other side of Utai, had wrapped her right arm around the younger girl and pulled her close.

“Uh, um,” he stammered. “When you say ‘c'mere’—”

“Just do what I'm doin'!”

Huh? he thought, but Niko was currently the submaster of Nega Nebulus, and Utai wasn't saying anything. He steeled himself before rolling ninety degrees to his right to cross Niko's right arm with his left and touch Utai's shoulders.

When he did, he felt small vibrations in his palm—she was shaking. This small body, less than half the size of his, was stiff, cold like ice, and shivering. She hadn't clenched her fists before to psych herself up. She had been trying to stop the shaking.

Ever since she returned to Nega Nebulus, Utai Shinomiya had been the Legion's booster and moral support. No matter what was happening, her smile never faltered as she encouraged other members with a calm attitude and warm words to give them all courage.

But she was still only ten years old. It was said that the actual and mental ages of high-level Burst Linkers diverged, but that didn't mean the feelings stopped. Even if they did learn the trick to withstanding terror, that didn't erase the terror itself.

Three years earlier, Utai had fought the God Suzaku and lost. That memory was no doubt still vivid in her mind. If Utai's Incarnate attack in the mission against the God Genbu failed, it was possible that not only Utai, but several of her comrades, would end up in Unlimited EK. That pressure made her slender body shake viciously.

After all, even Utai had times when she wanted to voice her fears or cling to someone else. But the parent who could've been there for her in those moments—her real-life older brother Kyoya Shinomiya/Mirror Masker—was no longer in the Accelerated World, nor even the real world. A mere year after he made her his child, the large mirror in their Noh Theater's Kagami-no-ma had fallen onto him and he lost his life right before Utai's eyes. That was the day she'd lost her voice.

Kyoya had been four years older than Utai, which meant that if he had been alive, he would've been in eighth grade—the same as Haruyuki. But Haruyuki could never take his place. Whatever Kyoya could have given Utai at a time like this, Haruyuki couldn't give her even a *piece* of that.

Knowing that, he still tightened his hand on Utai's shoulder slightly. The body

he touched through the fabric of her yukata felt a little cool after her bath. He scraped together all the energy in his body, thinking he should at least share his warmth with the shaking girl.

“Hey, Ui?” Niko said suddenly, glued to Utai on the other side. “It’s true that the main attacker tonight’s gonna be you. But like, you don’t gotta carry all that pressure or stress or whatever all by yourself. You gotta hand out that heavy stuff to the people around you. A good Legion lets you do that, yeah?”

She was exactly right. When he’d been parasitized by the Armor of Catastrophe, Haruyuki had tried to carry everything all by himself. But Takumu, Chiyuri, Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Utai had reached out and helped him support the weight of the armor.

“Me too,” he said. “I’ll carry this with you, too. I can’t be a part of the Genbu mission. But I’ll send you power from the real world while you’re accelerated, Shinomiya.”

Of course, in terms of the Brain Burst system, Haruyuki wouldn’t be able to support or interfere with Utai in any way in the Unlimited Neutral Field, even if they were directing. His voice wasn’t even allowed to reach her. But he was sure that there was something he could communicate that transcended the system. He believed it.

Glued to her friends on the blanket, Utai gradually regained her body heat, and her shaking slowly subsided. The hands she had kept clenched finally opened and touched the keyboard that only she could see.

The chat window had disappeared but now it popped up again. UI> NIKO, C. The letters scrolled out in a cherry-pink font.

And then they heard a sharp knocking and all three looked toward the sliding door. Haruyuki assumed it was Shiomi, so he panicked and tried to pull away from Utai, but before he could...

Bang! The door flew open and someone stomped inside to look down on the three of them lying on the tatami.

“I knew it!”

“Huh?! K-Kuroyukihime?” Haruyuki cried out, and the face that popped up

above his head was none other than that of his swordmaster, who he'd seen off early that morning from the Arita house. Fuko popped up beside her. "A-and Master...What's wrong?!"

Fuko smiled merrily. "Uiui messaged Sacchi and me that you and Niko were staying at her house, Corvus."

Haruyuki turned his head to the right, and Utai deleted the first line and began to type again.

UI> I THOUGHT THAT I SHOULD MAKE CLEAR YOUR WHEREABOUTS SINCE WE WILL BE CONTINUING A MAJOR MISSION FROM TONIGHT UNTIL TOMORROW. BUT WHY ARE YOU AND FU AT MY HOUSE, SACCHI?

"Because it is the role of the master to monitor the actions of her Legion members."

"A-actions," Haruyuki muttered.

"Corvus," Fuko said, smile still on her face, "I can't see this as anything other than a violation of public morals."

It was true that he could offer up no excuses for being glued to Utai and Niko, wrapped up in a single comforter together. On top of that, he could hear elegant footsteps that no doubt belonged to Shiomi in the hallway. He hurried to sit up and lay out the cushion he'd been using as a pillow before sitting up properly on his knees on it.

Shiomi appeared in the doorway, carrying a tray. She took a look at the strange situation in the room and furrowed her brow slightly.

"Miss Utai, as I recall, these young ladies did come to visit once several years ago, so I had them come inside. But it does appear that they are also acquaintances of the young master and mistress there. So I do have to wonder how it is that you all know each other?"

It was no wonder that she would wonder. Niko, in sixth grade, could just barely be seen as the same age as Utai, but Haruyuki was in eighth grade, Kuroyukihime in ninth, and Fuko tenth. At a glance, they had nothing in common, and they definitely couldn't tell her about Brain Burst.

"You're always such a good child—you're really too good, Miss Utai—so I

don't wish to say too much. But I am here to take care of you while the master of the house is away."

Haruyuki and the others stiffened at this, while Utai sat up formally on her knees on a cushion after adjusting the collar of her yukata and smiled brightly as she moved her fingers. UI> NANNY, ALL OF THESE PEOPLE ARE MY PRECIOUS

But the cursor stopped there. Shiomi had an elegant lavender Neurolinker on her neck, so she would have also been able to see the chat window. But Utai waved her left hand to erase the holo keyboard and then set her hands in her lap.

She sat up straight and took a deep breath. Her small lips trembled. Smile gone now, her face twisted, and she took several painful breaths.

"Miss!" Shiomi cried and started to run toward her.

But Utai whipped up a hand to stop her. She pressed that hand to her own chest and hit it once, twice. Almost as though she were trying to knock loose something caught in her throat.

"Uiui," Fuko said, her voice hoarse, but she didn't take a step toward the girl. Niko and Kuroyukihime watched with concern.

Utai gritted her teeth. Tears sprang up in the corners of her eyes and fell onto the lap of her yukata.

After Haruyuki had met Utai, he had looked up *aphasia*. Apparently, the syndrome in which words were lost due to a mental shock was called psychogenic aphonia. Meanwhile, expressive aphasia was a higher brain dysfunction caused by damage to the speech center of the brain, so Utai's symptoms of having become unable to speak from the shock of seeing her brother Kyoya die before her eyes appeared to be the former impairment.

But it turned out that an overly strong stressor could bring about organic damage to the brain. In Utai's case, this had meant treatment with a BIC, so they had confirmed actual damage in exams. In other words, her aphasia was not an impairment that could be overcome through her own will. Utai would have known that better than anyone else.

And yet, she wouldn't stop trying to speak.

Her hands tightly clenched on her lap, she leaned forward and continued to breathe quickly. It seemed relatively hard for her to call the acceleration command voicelessly, but that didn't begin to compare to the struggle now. Droplets of tears mixed with sweat fell on her tiny fists.

That's enough! Haruyuki desperately swallowed the cry that threatened to leap out of his throat.

The time seemed double, triple what it was. Ten, twenty seconds passed. And then.

“...F...”

The voice was so weak that it was almost drowned out by the cries of the cicadas coming in through the window glass, but it was there. The timbre of it was basically the same as the one he heard in the Accelerated World, but it was gentler and clearer.

“...F. Riend...s...”

When she squeezed the syllables out from the depths of her soul, Utai slumped as if drained of strength and propped herself up with her hands on the floor. After taking a few seconds to get her breathing back under control, she straightened up and touched her holo keyboard.

UI> MY FRIENDS! she typed with vigor.

Even though he could clearly see this text, the outer edge of the chat window was blurred into a rainbow, and Haruyuki blinked repeatedly. At the sensation of droplets sliding down his cheeks, he finally realized that he had tears in his eyes. He wiped at his eyes and looked up to see Shiomi also blinking quickly. She nodded slowly as a loving smile spread across her face.

“Is that so, then?” was all she said. She walked over to the low table against the wall and moved the glasses of cold tea from the tray in her hands onto it before standing up again. “Please relax and enjoy yourselves, everyone.” She left the room, and her footsteps in the hall outside gradually grew fainter.

“Uiui!” Fuko half-shrieked, and threw herself at Utai, almost sliding across the tatami mats. She deftly flipped around so that she was underneath the girl as she squeezed her with inhuman strength. Utai's hands reached into the air and

flailed at her holo keyboard.

UI> FU! I XAN'Y BREADHE.

Seeing this spring up in the chat window, Haruyuki, Niko, and Kuroyukihime all smiled through their tears.

Supper that evening was sukiyaki prepared for them by Shiomi. Her work normally ended with making supper for Utai, and she usually went home at five o'clock. But she stayed an hour later that day and made sure there was plenty of food for the five of them. Of course, Haruyuki and his friends also helped, but Shiomi was just so skilled in the kitchen that they weren't able to really do much of anything.

Once they finished a lively supper with the five of them crowded around a single pot, they cleaned up and then Kuroyukihime and Fuko got in the bath. When Kuroyukihime came back in a black kimono with a wavy stripe pattern and Fuko in a white yukata with a traditional hexagonal pattern in blue, it was seven thirty PM and study time.



When he thought about it, he had stayed at Kuroyukihime's on the twenty-first, the first day of summer break, and after the grand send-off party for him at the Arita house on the twenty-second, Seri, Rin, and Kuroyukihime had stayed over, and now he was staying over at Utai's. He was sure that Chiyuri would tell him he was playing around too much from the first day of summer break the next time he saw her, so he had to at least get the jump on his summer homework.

Fortunately, every time he got stuck on a difficult problem, Kuroyukihime—who was more the science type—and Fuko—who was more the literary type—gave him helpful hints, so he managed to get more than his quota done that day again. The older group helped the younger group while also getting through their own homework at a brisk pace, but although they kept pushing at it, they were also carrying the exhaustion of an important battle, so study time came to an end at nine thirty that night.

They had half an hour before the start of the mission to attack the God Genbu.

After replenishing their energy with tea made by Fuko and Utai and macarons brought by Kuroyukihime, they cleared away the coffee table once again and spread futons out on the tatami mats. The room was small, so two futons were the limit, but it was only the four girls who were diving, so that wasn't an issue.

Haruyuki thought about it and told Utai that he would take the chair. He started toward the wooden stool in front of her study desk, to sit there until they all returned.

"Why can't you lie down here, too, Haruyuki?" Kuroyukihime said, and the other three girls nodded.

"Huh?" He frowned. "But there's not a lot of room, and I'm not taking part in the mission, so..."

"It's a matter of feelings, Corvus," Fuko said. "When I think about someone looking at my face from over there while I'm accelerated, I won't be able to stay calm and fight."

"Yeah, totes. You gotta be in the same place in the real world *because* you

can't dive inside."

UI> THERE ARE NO BARRIERS IN NEGA NEBULUS!

In the face of this string of objections, he couldn't keep stubbornly refusing. With no other choice, he moved away from the stool and back toward the futons where the girls were sitting.

"O-okay, then just on the edge here." He lay down in a position that had half his body spilling off the futon so that he would take up as little space as possible.

But Niko jumped over him with the nimbleness of a duel avatar and came down to body-check him. "Boom!"

He reflexively jumped upward and was promptly pulled back down with a surprising amount of force, until he was maneuvered into the middle of the two futons.

"Ui! Hold that side down!"

UI> ON IT!

Niko threw herself onto his right arm and Utai onto his left, rendering him immobile.

He sent his eyes racing around, bewildered, and Kuroyukihime looked at the gleeful smiles of Niko and Utai with an exasperated, affectionate expression. Finally, she clapped her hands together.

"All right, then. Five minutes until mission start. Utai, is there a terminal for your home server in this room?"

UI> YES, ON THE BOTTOM SHELF.

Utai lived in a house that was so traditionally Japanese he wouldn't have been surprised if it were designated an important cultural property in the ward. But it seemed that a certain amount of work had been done to make even this a smart home, and a small device with a row of XSB ports sat on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. Kuroyukihime pulled five long cables out of her bag and first connected her own Neurolinker to the terminal before connecting the Neurolinkers of the others in a daisy chain. Now, when Kuroyukihime's

connection to the global net was cut off, that of the others would be cut off at the same time. This was the timed disconnection safety, an essential precaution when entering the Unlimited Neutral Field.

“I’m setting the timer for three hours of inside time. In other words, no matter how the mission drags on, all of us will be disconnected in ten point eight seconds in real time,” Kuroyukihime said, and sat down to the right of Niko as she looked at Haruyuki. “Naturally, I have no intention of actually taking ten seconds—three hours. Haruyuki, have faith in the success of our mission and wait for our return.”

“Okay!” he replied, and Kuroyukihime smiled in response before she lay down next to Niko. Fuko settled in beside Utai, and they all waited for ten PM. Forty more seconds. Thirty.

“Hey, Haruyuki, don’t go Unlimited after us,” Niko said, plastered to his right side.

“I-I wouldn’t!” he protested. “If I did, I’d die right there on the spot!”

“You’re careless is the thing, though.”

Instantly, laughter came from either side of him. When he looked to his left, he saw that Utai also had a huge grin on her face.

Fifteen seconds.

“Mei, good luck,” he murmured, and Utai nodded firmly, grin still on her face.

“All right, Niko, Utai, Fuko. We dive on the count of three,” Kuroyukihime instructed in a calm voice, stifling her own laughter.

A powerful feeling of frustration rose inside of Haruyuki once again.

Was there no way for him to support Utai—and all the people taking part in the Genbu mission? Was there nothing he could do besides pray in the real world?

“Countdown. Three, two, one...Unlimited Burst!”

The instant they called out the acceleration command—Utai alone with no sound—a single possibility sparked to life in the back of Haruyuki’s mind.

There...was maybe a way Silver Crow could help with the Genbu mission, even when he was sealed away at Tokyo Grand Castle in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

And so, a second after the four girls, Haruyuki also shouted,

“Burst Link!”

Haruyuki, in the form of his pink pig avatar, popped out with some force into the clear blue world of the initial acceleration space. After bouncing once, he stood up and looked behind him. Kuroyukihime, Niko, Haruyuki, Utai, and Fuko were lying with their eyes closed on two futons.

The acceleration of time in the Unlimited Neutral Field and the initial acceleration space was the same ratio of one thousand. But since his acceleration had been a second later, Kuroyukihime and the others were about seventeen minutes ahead of him. It would take time to meet near the Castle and go over the strategy, so they wouldn't have started the battle yet, but he couldn't dawdle here.

He thought for a second and then opened the sliding door and stepped out of Utai's room. He dashed intently down the long hallway on his short pig legs and went out the front door.

The Shinomiyas were a family of Noh actors of the acclaimed Kanze school. Thus, they had a proper Noh stage on the large grounds of the house. He ran over to this, bowed neatly at the entrance, and stepped inside.

The stage was made up of the main stage and the Kagami-no-ma connected by a hall called the Hashigakari. He had walked into Kagami-no-ma, basically a preparatory space. As a general rule, the Blue World of the initial acceleration space was composed of video that could be captured by the social cameras, but places that were outside the view of the cameras were recreated based on video captured by the Neurolinker's camera in the past, supplemented with estimated details.

The color of the Kagami-no-ma was blue, but the furnishings he'd seen just once in the real world were basically perfectly recreated. A room with wooden

flooring, about four meters squared. To his left was a door that led out to the main stage, and on his right was the door to the dressing room, while immediately ahead of him was a massive mirror, nearly two meters tall.

Haruyuki took a few steps forward to stand in front of this mirror. Three years ago, it had fallen down on top of Utai's older brother and parent, Kyoya Shinomiya. The sharp fragments had sliced into him and taken his life. In that moment, Utai had lost the ability to speak, and the pale pink *hakama* trousers of Ardor Maiden had turned a deep crimson.

Even in the Blue World, however, a mirror functioned as a mirror, and Haruyuki's avatar was clearly reflected. He stared at his pig self and began to speak to the person who might lie within that reflection.

Kyoya...Mirror Masker. I can't even imagine how much regret you must feel. I can't take your place. I can't ease Utai's pain on your behalf. But my desire to help her is real.

Right now, she's taking on what might be the most difficult fight since she became a Burst Linker, even more painful than the battle against the God Suzaku three years ago. And that's because Utai knows how terrifying the Gods are now. She knows and she's attacking the overly powerful foe who put her into an Unlimited EK. For my sake. To save me now that I've been captured by the White King.

So I want to help her. Even if it's just the tiniest bit, I want to be there for her. If your spirit still lingers here, please guide me.

Haruyuki prayed to Mirror Masker before slowly crouching his pig avatar down and readying his left hand in front of him and his right at his hip. He clenched his black hooves and focused his mind.

When he revived Seri Suzukawa, he had accessed the Highest Level like this. But he'd only connected for a mere instant then. This time, that wouldn't be enough. So far, he'd only been able to shift completely to the Highest Level by borrowing Metatron's power or by swinging his sword in practice in the Unlimited Neutral Field for a dozen hours, but he had to do it now under his own power from this initial acceleration space.

A focus surpassing all limits. That was the key to breaking the wall between

worlds. The ultimate concentration, enough to put an excess load on Haruyuki's quantum thought circuits, which the White King called his "light cube."

With Seri, his pummeling fists had only just barely touched the wall between worlds. This time, he needed to smash it.

He didn't have enough time to try again and again. If he couldn't break the wall with his first blow, he was probably never going to be able to, no matter how many times he swung his fists. He might have managed to make it there if he kept swinging for dozens of hours like he had in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but by that time, the attack on Genbu would be over. And more to the point, he could only stay in the Blue World for half an hour.

Focus.

Focus.

Focus...

With his right fist at the ready, Haruyuki tried desperately to increase his powers of concentration.

And then, abruptly, he heard a voice in his ears.

Light.

I feel a light inside of you. Just like when you protected Utai and those others from the darkness launched by the god of the end. The photons locked up in the light cubes and Main Visualizer continue to vibrate eternally. If you sense that light and become one with it, you can go to a new stage. Take the power of the Incarnate even further.

"*Light,*" Haruyuki mouthed, then closed his eyes.

When he'd discovered his Incarnate technique, Light Shell, he thought he'd uncovered the light given to Silver Crow as an attribute. But perhaps that light was not inside of his duel avatar, but rather himself. Maybe the same light existed inside the heart of every Burst Linker?

Light. Focus. Light. Focus your mind and become one with the light. Don't put a load on the light cube. Fuse with it.

Haruyuki had fused with the world—the outside—through the Omega style

Whole Blade's Gou. He had fused with his mind—the inside—through the second-stage Incarnate technique, Light Shell.

Do both at the same time. Outside—the Main Visualizer. Inside—the light cube. They were connected by light, and when they became one, a new door would open.

A pure white light rose from inside his pig avatar. It became a wave and surged out to fill his body. The self reflected in the mirror melted into the glow.

Haruyuki took a step and thrust out his right fist. A blow that was totally different than it had been when he went to Seri, an almost gentle feel to it.

A fist of undulating light touched the enormous mirror. Silent cracks raced outward along the surface, and the mirror began to shatter from the inside. On the other side, an endlessly starry sky spread out like the Milky Way.

You have to help Utai.

The voice he heard once more was drowned out by the squeal of acceleration.

Before he knew it, Haruyuki was standing on top of the quietly glittering galaxy.

“Whoa?!” he cried out before looking down at his body. His pig avatar...was not there. Although it was slightly see-through, he was wearing the form of Silver Crow.

The Highest Level.

Finally, he'd been able to reach this place once more under his own power.

“Ye—” He was about to strike a triumphant pose and then hurriedly lowered his hands. Coming to this place was not his ultimate goal, and he wasn't so sure he could say it was entirely under his own power.

He had definitely heard a voice in the Kagami-no-ma. The composed, but still youthful, voice of a boy. It was different from Trilead's or Chrome Falcon's or Wolfram Cerberus's. It was...perhaps...

He shook his head to bring his wandering thoughts to a halt. There was something else he had to do right now.

He dropped his eyes to the galaxy below once more. The countless bits of stardust shining quietly there were almost all “nodes,” indicating the positions of social cameras in the real world. When he looked at them with this in mind, he could see that they drew out a detailed map of central Tokyo through the strength of the light and the lines between them.

Directly below him was a constellation shining remarkably brightly, probably Shinjuku. Ikebukuro to the north and Shibuya to the south created their own separate constellations.

He followed the distinct road of stars that stretched out from Shinjuku station, where a multitude of nodes were crushed together, to the east. That was likely National Route 20, Shinjuku-dori. The dark area on the south side of the road was Shinjuku Gyoen Park. Beyond that, Yotsuya, Kojimachi. And the massive space even farther still, spreading out like a dark nebula over central Tokyo, was the Imperial Palace—the Castle.

Haruyuki spread the silver wings on his back—although there was probably no need for that—and dropped down toward the Castle.

He didn't feel as though he were cutting through the air, but the sea of stars drew near in the blink of an eye. The points of light dotting the large road were probably Enemies, different in size and color from the nodes. He slipped across the Sobu line at Yotsuya and headed slightly to the left. He passed Chiyoda's Ichibancho, flying along Daikancho-dori, and soon Kitanomaru Park, the site of that intense battle, came into view ahead on the left, while on the right, he saw the north gate of the Castle—the Genbu gate.

In the Highest Level, the Four Gods should have looked like poisonous and massive blobs of light, but the area around the Genbu gate was shrouded in darkness. Which meant that the attack hadn't started yet.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he turned on a dime to the left. The meeting spot for the mission was the same as it had been for the Inti mission, Gijo Plaza at the Ministry of Defense, so he started to head in that direction.

"Aah!" he cried out, before spreading his wings to brake abruptly. It was actually strange to not sense any momentum at all, unlike in the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field or the Lowest Level of the Normal Duel Field, but that didn't matter right now.

About eight hundred meters to the east of Ichigaya Station, a number of small stars of various colors were forming a line on Yasukuni-dori. There were more than fifty of them. It couldn't have been Enemies. This was Kuroyukihime and the Genbu attack team.

When he looked at the column with that in mind, he could make out stars that were dark and light blue, green and red, and a black star with a bluish-purple shimmer to it at the head of the line. He'd thought it was impossible to

identify individual Burst Linkers from the Highest Level, but now he instinctively knew that they were Takumu, Fuko, Chiyuri, Utai, and Kuroyukihime. He could see the stars of Akira, Niko, Pard, Rui, and the Petit Paquet team immediately behind them.

The party was approaching a point about two hundred meters from Kitanomaru Park. In Unlimited Neutral Field time, they would arrive at the standby position in front of the Genbu gate in less than ten minutes and then do their final mission checks.

But time on the Highest Level flowed at such a super-amplification that even the Unlimited Neutral Field looked as though it were frozen. No matter how many hours he waited here, Kuroyukihime and the others would never reach the Genbu gate.

What Haruyuki was trying to do from the Highest Level was support Utai.

Metatron had once asserted that all he could do in this place was observe. But at the same time, she had also said that it wasn't impossible for a presence that could see everything to directly interfere with the information on the Highest Level.

Naturally, he was far from having reached that level. But maybe the Haruyuki of this moment might be able to interfere just the tiniest, teensiest bit—for instance, touch Utai's star and try to send her energy. Or maybe it would all end in his own conceit, but even so, this was way better than just counting down the seconds in the real world.

In order for him to send Utai energy, however, he needed the time to proceed to the start of the Genbu attack. He didn't have the luxury of returning to the real world for a moment and coming back to the Highest Level again. Was there a way for him to lower his acceleration rate here somehow?

He could ask Metatron how. Even as the thought came to him, he was shaking his head from side to side. There was still another day of real time before her recovery would be complete. He had no intention of disturbing her before then.

I'll try going to the Genbu gate at any rate, he thought and ascended once more.

Metatron had said that “distance” did not exist on the Highest Level. In which case, maybe it was possible to teleport simply with a thought. But he couldn’t even guess at how to do that, and he had no reason to hurry at the moment.

He traced his route back to Kitanomaru Park. Nippon Budokan had also been restored because the Sun God Inti had been terminated and the Change had happened. Which perhaps also meant that Inti had been restored somewhere without its insides, but there was no need for Haruyuki to bother with that ball of flames anymore. He moved slowly, looking at Budokan on his right, and stopped in the sky above the National Museum of Modern Art.

Of all the landmarks in central Tokyo, the Castle of the Accelerated World was the only one that was significantly different from its real-world counterpart. The real-world Imperial Palace was a long hexagon, but the Castle was a perfect circle, completely isolated by a wide moat, connected to the outside world only by the bridges to the north, east, south, and west. To the south of Kitanomaru Park was Inuimon, corresponding to the north gate of the Castle; although it was connected by land in the real world, here it was a bottomless moat, five hundred meters across, a gaping maw to suck in any who approached. A thirty-meter-wide bridge spanned this moat, with a massive castle gate rising at the end of it. This was the Castle’s north gate, the Genbu gate.

Three years earlier, the first Nega Nebulus had divided into four teams and attempted an assault on the Castle. Leading the team to attack the south’s Suzaku gate was Testarossa, Ardor Maiden; the east’s Seiryu gate was covered by Aquamatic, Aqua Current; the west’s Byakko gate was covered by Strato-Shooter/Sky Raker and World End/Black Lotus; and the person responsible for the north’s Genbu gate was Anomaly, Graphite Edge.

The battle had ended in a mere 120 seconds, and Nega Nebulus had been annihilated. Although Sky Raker had managed to flee with Black Lotus at the west gate, Ardor Maiden, Aqua Current, and Graphite Edge had fallen into Unlimited EKs because they had helped the other Legion members escape the fierce attacks of the Four Gods.

Maiden and Current had finally been rescued the previous month, but Graph had apparently escaped from the Unlimited EK under his own power long, long ago. But, unable to make it to the other side of the bridge due to the immense

power of Genbu's gravity attack, he'd gone in the opposite direction, sliced through the gate (which wouldn't normally open unless Genbu was defeated) with his third-stage Incarnate technique, Elucidator, and escaped into the Castle.

While he was the first seat of Great Wall's Six Armors, he was also still a prisoner of the Castle in the Unlimited Neutral Field. It seemed that he himself was not particularly upset by the situation, and when Kuroyukihime and the others had fallen into the Unlimited EK, he'd kept an eye on Inti for them from inside the Castle for nearly a year. But now they needed him to be on the other side of the Castle walls. Not to save Haruyuki, but to stop the White King from using Tezcatlipoca.

Haruyuki suddenly remembered that Graphite Edge had naturally been told about the Genbu mission, so he should have been on standby near the gate, ready to escape. From the Highest Level, Haruyuki should have been able to see him, right?

He went higher in the black space and tried to peer inside the Genbu gate. But even though the gate, drawn out in points of white light, was semi-transparent, the space beyond it was filled with inky darkness; he couldn't see a single node.

So the Castle exterior and interior were completely separate worlds after all. An impregnable fortress—or jail—built by a different creator than that of the expansive Accelerated World. Most likely, even if he approached from the Highest Level, he would be rebuffed by an invisible defensive wall in the air above the moat.

He gave up on looking for Graph and got to thinking. In this world where time was essentially stopped, it wasn't actually practical to wait for the start of the mission. Was there some way he could fast-forward—or put another way, decelerate his own mind? Crossing his arms in midair, he looked around the world below aimlessly, as if searching for a hint.

To the west side of the National Museum of Modern Art was a large parking lot and a stand of trees. To the north was the Science Museum, while to the east stood a mixed-use commercial building with two distinctive towers. There

would be the most social cameras inside the commercial building. Looking from this distance, he could see even the faint streams of light connecting the dense clusters of lights. Since all the social cameras were connected to a special network and the information was sent to the Social Security Surveillance Center, the location of which was not public, if he followed that flow of light, he might be able to learn where the SSSC was.

These thoughts drifting through his mind, Haruyuki stared at the streams of light connecting the nodes. And then he noticed it:

The tower rising at the end of the long commercial building. And motionless inside of it, lights that were not nodes. There were four—no, five—of them. Pale purple, dark red, a saturated gray, an almost perfect black, and a strange color that mixed silver and red with darkness.

Those weren't Enemies. They were Burst Linkers.

Had he happened upon a small Legion out hunting Enemies? But with so few people, it was hard to imagine that they would come this close to the Castle. Powerful Beast-class Enemies regularly appeared around the streets of Uchibori-dori and Yasukuni-dori. Enemies like Flame Blower, which they'd encountered right before the fight with Inti, were difficult foes that even ten high rankers would find formidable. So then, what was that group...

Dropping down from his high altitude, he stared hard at the five points of light. He had a sudden flash of ominous understanding and groaned.

The pale purple light in the middle of the group. He'd seen light of that very color any number of times before. A purple light that flickered immediately before lasers were launched from four lenses—two in the hat as well as both eyes. That point of light was Quad Eyes Analyst, Argon Array.

The instant he realized this, the identities of the other points of light popped into his mind one after the other. The dark red was Rust Jigsaw, who had barged into the Hermes' Cord race. The saturated gray was Shadow Cloaker, whom Haruyuki had fought in the Territories with the White Legion and immediately before the Inti drop. The dot that was so black it almost melted into the background was his bitter enemy, Black Vise. And the point of light that was a swirl of silver and red and darkness was Wolfram Cerberus, made one

with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. The Acceleration Research Society. Basically their entire battle team.

There was no way this was a coincidence. They were an ambush for Kuroyukihime and the Genbu attack team.

“The information...leaked?” he murmured hoarsely, before shaking his head as hard as he could.

There couldn’t have been an informant in Nega Nebulus or the other Legions. Through some means or other, the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society were able to monitor the happenings in the Unlimited Neutral Field. The first thing that came to mind was Black Vise’s ability to decelerate, but this time, that couldn’t have been it. Because Vise’s deceleration used the BIC in his brain, so unlike Avocado Avoider’s Void, the effect wouldn’t be extended to other Burst Linkers.

But the how of it didn’t matter at the moment. He had to tell Kuroyukihime and the others that the Acceleration Research Society was lying in wait for them. If they got in the way of the mission, not only would Graphite Edge not be able to escape, but several people, including Utai and Graph, might very well end up in Unlimited EK with Genbu.

But how was he supposed to tell them?

Stop accelerating and take off Kuroyukihime’s Neurolinker? No, that would end up just like it had been with Haruyuki the other day: Even if the other person was lying right next to you, it took at least three seconds to wake up, sit up, grab hold of the Neurolinker, and yank it off. During that time, three thousand seconds would pass in the Accelerated World—fifty minutes. Plenty of time for Kuroyukihime and the team to arrive at the Castle’s north gate and begin the mission.

And the only ones who would be able to forcibly disconnect like that were Kuroyukihime, with Utai, Fuko, and Niko daisy-chained to her. For the other members of the group, the most powerful portion of their main force would suddenly disappear, so that would actually increase the danger they were in.

What should he do? How could he...

Floating in the inky black of the information space, Haruyuki racked his brain. He had unlimited time for thinking, if nothing else, so he would examine every method, investigate, and discard each of them until he came to one conclusion.

He had no choice but to warn them directly from the Highest Level. He didn't even know whether or not his attempt to send energy to Utai would be effective, so he highly doubted that he would be able to snap his fingers and start talking to them, but he had no choice except to try.

Previously, when Metatron was on the verge of annihilation in the fight against the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, he had been able to call to her via the Highest Level and reestablish the link between them when it was nearly severed. Naturally, he'd been able to do this because the link was already there to start with. He didn't have anything corresponding to this link with Kuroyukihime, Utai, or any of the others, but he did have a connection in the form of their bonds of friendship. He was sure that even if words themselves were impossible, he would be able to send them the idea of a warning.

"Kuroyukihime." He closed his eyes and called up an image of his Legion Master in his mind.

It was her in her black-spangle-butterfly avatar, from when she called out to him for the first time in the squash game corner in the Umesato Junior High local net. In her uniform, when she offered him an XSB cable in the school cafeteria lounge. Her duel avatar self, fierce and awe-inspiring when she announced the return of Nega Nebulus. And the ephemeral figure like an ice sculpture, beautiful like a sprite, when she showed him the barcode at the nape of her neck.

Haruyuki and Silver Crow were knights who had offered their swords to Kuroyukihime and the Black King. His vow to protect her in the face of all danger shone a constant light on the path ahead of him and gave him the strength to keep moving forward. Even if he couldn't do it for his own sake, he could do it for her. He was sure of this.

He clenched his hands into tight fists and closed his eyes. He spread the wings on his back and was about to move back to Yasukuni-dori, where Kuroyukihime and the team were en route.

Ping...

He heard a faint noise like an extremely thin piece of metal being hit by the world's smallest hammer.

Ping. Ping. The crystallized sound repeated and echoed through the dark virtual space. As it gradually grew louder, it sparked something in Haruyuki's memory.

It was when the Territories stage against the White Legion had turned into the Unlimited Neutral Field due to Megumi Wakamiya/Orchid Oracle's Incarnate technique, Paradigm Breakdown. He had immediately called Metatron and gotten her to shift his consciousness to the Highest Level. It was there that he heard this sound.

Feeling a sharp shiver run down his spine, he looked over his shoulder.

Ping. The sound—the footsteps—stopped.

A hazy white figure floated up against the inky darkness. Drawn out in cool, semi-transparent light was a surprisingly slender F-type duel avatar. Dress-type armor patterned after crystals, long hair that fell into curls, a tiara of sharp needles. Although she was as slender as the White King, she was much shorter. He didn't know the color of her armor, but there was no mistaking this form. The second of Oscillatory Universe's Seven Dwarves, Sleepy, aka...

"Snow Fairy!" he cried, and the sprite avatar turned an innocent smile on him.

"It's been a while, Silver Crow." Her faintly echoing voice was sweetly sour, like fruit syrup dripped over a light snowfall. "So we meet again, hmm?"

"Why are you here?!"

"You asked me the same thing last time. And my answer is the same. Because I got the feeling I was being watched."

"..."

When they'd met during the Territories, Snow Fairy had said that she'd felt his gaze on her in the Unlimited Neutral Field from the Highest Level.

"But." Haruyuki dropped his eyes momentarily to the tower building below him. "It's only the members of the Acceleration Research Society over there. I

don't see you at all."

"They're amateurs," she announced, before smiling once again. "As are you, Crow. When it comes to the Highest Level, I'm very much your greatest senior."

Haruyuki reflexively held up his fists. He knew that there were no health gauges or collision detection in the Highest Level, but even so, he couldn't stop himself from taking a defensive posture.

He thought about the word "senior" for a second and then asked, "So you... You're a contractor, too, huh?"

"Oh my! And who did you learn that word from?"

He'd heard it from Centaurea Sentry, but offering up that name would only hurt his cause. There was one other Burst Linker who'd used the same word, however. Haruyuki himself believed that he hadn't signed a contract with Metatron but rather had become her friend, but this wasn't the time for saying that, either.

"From the White King."

"Aah." Fairy cocked her head adorably to one side. "Is that it? You talked to Cosmos, then. The whims of the King are so troublesome, hmm? Even though we're approaching the last page of the story."

"The last page?" he parroted, but Fairy didn't bother to explain. Instead, she brought her hands behind her body.

Ping. Piiing. She took a step or two and looked at him once again. "I wonder if I'm actually a contractor according to Cosmos's definition. The one I contracted with is already gone from this world."

"Gone?" Haruyuki frowned. "It's not one of the Four Saints—wait, one of the two besides Metatron and Amaterasu?"

"It's not Xiwangmu or Ushas. And of course it's not Nyx."

"X-Xiwang..." Haruyuki cocked his head to one side as one unfamiliar name after another came out of her mouth. But Fairy paid this no mind as she continued.

"I mean that there are other Enemies with light cubes. But those that have

been initialized, well,” she said, shook her head slightly, and looked at Haruyuki with cute eye lenses. “Now, how about we put an end to the talking there? I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to be frozen here for a while.”

“F-frozen?”

“After all, you came to interfere, didn’t you? In the ambush?”

Slapped with the question of the hour, he hesitated for an instant before nodding. There was no point in trying to deceive her now. “Of course. Now that I know there’s an ambush, I can’t exactly sit back and watch.”

“Then I can’t let you be now that I know you’ll get in the way.”

Haruyuki gasped as he felt something like a sudden and powerful chill blow toward him from the small body of the faintly smiling girl.

It was a hallucination; it wasn’t possible to interfere with anyone else physically on the Highest Level. When Snow Fairy had appeared before, she’d tried to sever the link between Haruyuki and Metatron, but Metatron wasn’t even there now. He should have had no reason to fear any kind of damage from Fairy, but as she herself had noted, she was indeed his “greatest senior.” The true meaning of her “frozen” was unclear, but there was a non-zero possibility of her doing something other than physically interfering with him or cutting that link.

In which case.

Without any kind of preparatory movement whatsoever, he abruptly shot into the air. He raced upward to an altitude at which he could no longer make out the individual points in the herds of nodes on the ground, and then shifted to flying horizontally. He flew at full speed toward the glitter of Shinjuku he could see in the west.

Snow Fairy had walked on her own feet in the Highest Level. From the speed of her movement, it would be impossible for her to keep capturing him at flight speed. He’d pull back for the moment, take a large detour, and then drop down to just barely above the surface and fly back to Kuroyukihime and the others. Naturally, Fairy would probably show up again, but if he could just communicate the danger to Kuroyukihime before she found him, it didn’t

matter what she did after that.

He flew far above Shinjuku-dori, many times faster than when he'd first come down the road, passed Yotsuya, and arrived at Shinjuku Gyoen Mae. It was then.

Ping.

He heard the sound once more.

"...?!"

Stunned, he put on the brakes with his wings. Even though he shouldn't have had any momentum, he slid another ten meters before finally coming to a stop.

In the sky ahead of him, a white figure floated up hazily. The tiara made from ice thorns. The dress that was a lace of snowflakes. Snow Fairy, with the glittering stars of Shinjuku behind her.

Haruyuki whirled around to look back at the Castle far behind him and then turned back to Fairy. "H-how?! There's no way you could catch up with me!"

"And that's why you're an amateur," the girl nicknamed Sleepy said, shrugging slightly. "Didn't anyone tell you that distance has no meaning on the Highest Level?"

"Y-yes, but that doesn't mean..."

"Crow, right now, you and I are looking at something like a three-dimensional monitor that's displaying the locations of data on the Mean Level. Because it's a monitor, you can shift your focus anywhere you'd like. Right now, you're desperately moving it with the cursor, but it's much easier to specify the coordinates and jump."

He frowned. "Does that mean that you can freely teleport to anywhere in the Highest Level?"

"If it's a place and range that I can grasp, yes." She nodded.

"H-how?"

"First, take something from where you want to—" she started to say, raising a hand, but then abruptly closed her mouth and paused before speaking again.

“Why exactly should I tell you?”

“Why? I mean, I...”

“It’d be a waste to tell you anyway. This world’s ending soon, after all.”

“Ending?” he said.

Fairy gestured gently with the hand she held at chest level. “The end can no longer be avoided. The question is only how we Burst Linkers will end. Will we finish our time in pain, humiliation, and despair like the Assault Linkers and the Corrupt Linkers? Or...”

She cut herself off, sighed briefly, and closed her hand into a fist.

Instantly, Haruyuki was turned to stone. The sensation was far beyond a numbness or being dunked in ice. He still had his senses, but it was as though his fingers, his mouth, even his eyelids had turned into chunks of metal. Although duel avatars had no need of oxygen, they did feel their lungs filling with and emptying of air, something he had also felt on the Highest Level. But now he couldn’t even breathe.

This suffocating feeling was an illusion. He knew that in his head, but the sheer fact of being unable to breathe filled him with a bottomless terror. He wanted to shout. He wanted to tear at his throat. But neither his mouth nor his hands moved.

“Sorry. I know it hurts. But I have no choice. It could get a teensy bit annoying if Graphite Edge came out to play now. But relax. We won’t put Black Lotus and the others into an Unlimited EK. We just want them to give up on opening the gate,” Fairy said, her voice almost kind, as she walked around behind him. *Ping. Ping.*

“Assume that you’ll spend a very, very long time in this state, until someone in the Lowest Level takes your Neurolinker off. Poor dear. I’ll stay with you for a while.”

She flashed him a smile and sat down, hugging her knees. She took her gaze off Haruyuki and began to rock slowly from side to side as she gazed at the Castle in the distance.

Haruyuki didn't have the brain waves to imagine what Snow Fairy was thinking.

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

He tried desperately to suck in some air, but even his lungs were metal, and no matter how he tried, they would not expand. If he could only pass out, but the mind that wanted this showed no signs of fading. Only a clear agony, terror, and panic filled his thoughts.

Someone. Someone. Someone.

But this was the Highest Level, that only those guided by the most high-ranking Beings could reach. He could pray until the end of time, but there would be no help coming. Was his only choice to endure this until Kuroyukihime removed his Neurolinker for him, as Fairy had said? But how many hours would pass before that happened...

Someone. Someone...

After a minute that felt like an eternity, Haruyuki had a sudden realization.

Metatron. She knew the Highest Level backward and forward. Couldn't she free him from this frozen state? She was his only hope. He needed her to free him from this suffering. He was about to shout the Archangel's name in his head with all his might.

But then he mustered up what little remained of his ability to think in the troughs of the waves of suffering and terror and stopped his shrieking cry of a thought.

Why didn't Snow Fairy leave him and return to the Unlimited Neutral Field? Because she felt bad for him? There was no way. He didn't know what the rate of time acceleration was in the Highest Level, but assuming it was a thousand times that of the Unlimited Neutral Field, if things went very south, it could take over a thousand hours—forty days—until Haruyuki was forcibly disconnected. He had a hard time believing that she was the kind of person who would waste that much time out of sheer pity.

Snow Fairy was waiting for something. And that something was Metatron. She was trying to make him summon her to finish the job of severing the link

between them. Which meant that Fairy—the White Legion—viewed the connection between Haruyuki and Metatron as a danger on the same level as Graphite Edge’s escape.

I can’t call her, Haruyuki told himself, enduring the incredible agony.

He had made a vow. He would not call Metatron until she had completely recovered. It wasn’t as though he now had a health gauge that was being depleted, and no burst points were being taken from him. And naturally, there was no damage to his flesh-and-blood body. It was just painful; it was just hard. But when he thought back to the previous year when the boys in his class were bullying him, this was nothing.

Now that he was thinking about it, a true high ranker like Snow Fairy, second of the Seven Dwarves of the White Legion, was there now to take care of him. Haruyuki. Silver Crow—a small fry to look at, with no serious special attacks, who had fought in a clumsy panic when he’d first appeared in the Accelerated World and had been laughed at by the Gallery—was now making trouble for an established top player. For a gamer, was there any greater joy?

He would endure this for however long it took, until Fairy threw in the towel. He would suffer this pain and keep her glued to this spot.

Well, but wait, that was no good—he had to tell Kuroyukihime and the others about the Acceleration Research Society ambush. Fairy had said they weren’t planning to put the attacking team into Unlimited EK, but unless his comrades achieved their goal of freeing Graphite Edge, the mission would end in failure.

He would break this petrification under his own power. He could do it. He had to do it. No matter how “senior” she was, Snow Fairy was a Burst Linker just like him. There was no distance on the Highest Level. Similarly, there were no levels or statuses.

This was an idea world that made information visual. The nodes, Enemies, and Burst Linkers expressed as points of light were its true essence, and the figures of Haruyuki and the others depicted as duel avatars were merely what he felt through his subjective experience. But the truth was, his duel avatar was not here. All that existed was the mind of the observer, Haruyuki. Snow Fairy had interfered with that mind and given it the sensation—or rather the

hallucination—that it was unable to move.

Haruyuki couldn't do the same thing to her. But maybe he could interfere with his own mind? Like when he'd escaped from Tezcatlipoca's gravitational wave attack, Toxcatl.

At that time, he'd succeeded in slipping out of the giant's sights, albeit only for an instant, through the null Incarnate that diluted his mind to the limits. If he could do the same thing here and now, maybe he could escape from Fairy's interference.

But to do that, he would have to completely banish the terror and pain of not being able to breathe from his mind. Even if he knew in his head that his duel avatar didn't exist, much less his flesh-and-blood body, it wasn't easy to fight back against the sensation that no air was coming into his lungs. The fact was, the moment his thoughts stopped, his senses all focused on this suffering. If only Fairy had not just frozen his avatar but also taken all sensation, he could have gotten away without this pain...

Wait.

If that was possible, then Fairy had deliberately left his senses alone. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to make him suffer. She'd done it to force him to summon Metatron to escape from his pain.

So then all he had to do was eliminate his senses.

The image. Imagine it: There was no flesh-and-blood body inside his avatar. There was only the light of information. Light felt nothing. It couldn't be broken. It couldn't be captured. It simply existed...

His body gradually grew warmer. The sensation receded from his fingertips and toes. His arms and legs were cut away. His hips, his stomach melted into nothing. His chest became particles of light and spread out, and in that instant, the pain vanished like it had never been at all. His neck, his face, his head also disappeared. Now Haruyuki was a congregate of white photons drifting through space.

Snow Fairy sat motionless, arms around her knees. She was still looking at Silver Crow's avatar through her subjective lens. She hadn't noticed that he had

cut himself off from physical sensation.

His avatar was gone, but he still couldn't move. Snow Fairy's mental interference of "can't move" continued. Unless he broke free of it, he wouldn't be able to warn Kuroyukihime.

The next quadrant. He could expand his consciousness with null Incarnate and escape Fairy's sights.

Imagine it.

This mind that was now light, spreading out through the entire world. A flow of information connecting infinite nodes. Coming together, pulling apart, creating complex routes. Those routes spread out endlessly. From Tokyo to Kanto to Honshu to the farthest reaches of Japan.

The flat information map was split above and below. The triple-layered Japan—the true Accelerated World. Although myriad Enemies and so many fewer Burst Linkers existed in the central layer that was Haruyuki's world, there was no active information in the worlds above and below. Accel Assault and Cosmos Corrupt. They had both been closed. And if what the White King and Snow Fairy had said was true, then that time was also approaching for Brain Burst.

No.

This was...

One more. High, high, high above...Another map in the distant heights?

A fourth world. A very small, but very active, new world.

Unable to believe what he was sensing, Haruyuki earnestly tried to send his mind there. His mind was unintentionally dispersed to the limit and he disappeared from Snow Fairy's awareness.

The restraint came undone, and with the backlash of that, the congregation of photons that formed Haruyuki scattered to and permeated every corner of the Highest Level—or put another way, the Main Visualizer.

At that instant, five top-level Beings touched Haruyuki's mind, each reacting in its own way.

Abandoned Princess Bari.

Goddess of the Dawn Ushas.

Queen Mother of the West Xiwangmu.

Storm King Rudra.

Shrine Maiden of the Sun Amaterasu.

Two were mildly interested at the sudden contact, but one was a little annoyed, and one was angered. This Being tried to expel Haruyuki's mind from the Highest Level, but it laid down its arms through Amaterasu's intervention. All five Beings, however, marked him and established extremely fine links, but Haruyuki didn't notice that.

The vast amount of information that flowed into his dispersed mind was far too great for him to possibly begin to process, and he selected just one presence out of all the noise to focus his senses on. The information didn't include a form or a voice, but even so, he knew who it was. If he had to say, it was the scent that gave it away. More brisk than sweet, a clear aroma that was pure and strong.

Kuroyukihime!

He concentrated his dispersed mind. Instantly, the cascade of information filling his senses receded, and a single point of light appeared before his eyes.

A jet-black star wrapped in a bluish-purple glow. Around it were stars of blue, red, light blue, and green—Kuroyukihime and his Nega Nebulus comrades. Haruyuki teleported from the sky above Shinjuku Gyoen Mae to near Kitanomaru Park. Snow Fairy must have noticed that. He had no doubt that she would also move once more in a second—no, half a second.

Now he himself had turned into a silver star, like Kuroyukihime and the others. He had no hands or mouth, but he instinctively knew what to do. He advanced ever so slightly and fused part of the silver and black stars.

The moment he sensed that his and Kuroyukihime's quantum circuits were linked, he communicated to her not in words with a voice but in compressed thought itself.

Acceleration Research Society ambush. Black Vise, Argon Array, Shadow

Cloaker, Rust Jigsaw, Wolfram Cerberus. East of the National Museum of Modern Art, inside the tower of the commercial building. Snow Fairy is also lying in wait nearby, detailed position unknown. Fairy is watching the attack team from the Highest Level and can see all your movements.

Haruyuki transmitted this information in less than 0.1 seconds of his own subjective time. He had no sooner finished than he felt Snow Fairy about to materialize nearby.

He released his mind once more. This time, he didn't spread out across the Highest Level, but rather, the instant he sensed the presence of a certain Burst Linker, he flew toward it.

The nodes and points of light around him that were his comrades shrank to a single point in the center of his field of view and scattered. Before his eyes now, stars of a different color assembled: gray, rust, light purple...and black.

One star boasted a darkness so deep it threatened to suck in his consciousness from just looking at it. This was without a doubt Black Vise. But when he thought about it, "Black Vise" was only what the avatar called himself, and this was actually Ivory Tower. In which case, the star should have been ivory colored...

Wait. Now was not the time to be concerned with that. Snow Fairy would catch up with him soon.

Haruyuki shifted his gaze to look at the fifth star, slightly apart from the others. It was entirely different from the other Burst Linkers he'd seen. The base was a steel color slightly more saturated than his own silver, but mixed into it were bloodred and a dense darkness, giving the star an irregular marbled appearance.

This was Wolfram Cerberus. The red light was probably the hover-thruster stolen from Niko's Enhanced Armament, Invincible, and the inky darkness was the massive amount of accumulated negative Incarnate energy. When he looked at it with that in mind, it seemed to him that the red and the black were holding the steel planet captive.

Black Vise had called Cerberus "Wolfram Disaster," as if to declare that this change was irreversible. But that couldn't be. Just as Haruyuki had been able to

undo the curse of the Armor of Catastrophe, it had to be possible to release Cerberus from the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and return him to his true self—the boy who loved the duel more than anyone else, the boy Haruyuki had seen only the one time in the hustle and bustle of Koenji.

As he had with Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki fused their two stars the tiniest bit. Instantly, an incredible amount of information pushed toward him. But it wasn't exactly information in a certain sense; rather, it was a tumultuous darkness swirling with anger, pain, hatred, and every other negative emotion.

Deep inside this, however, in the place that corresponded to the star's core, a skinny boy crouched, clutching his knees. He was protecting himself, preventing himself from being swallowed up by the overwhelming negative Incarnate.

Cerberus!

Fighting against the darkness that pushed at him, Haruyuki tried to send his thoughts to the boy.

I'm going to get you out of there! I will! We'll purify the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and put an end to the plotting of the Acceleration Research Society! So when we do, let's duel again!

He wasn't sure if his message got through. But he felt like the crouched boy lifted his face just the tiniest bit.

He was out of time. Snow Fairy was trying to manifest somewhere nearby. He felt bad that he couldn't send Utai any energy, but if his warning had gotten through, Kuroyukihime would be putting a stop to the Genbu mission. They had nearly a full day before the main event of the Tezcatlipoca attack, so they could stop for the time being and try again later.

There was nothing else Haruyuki could do there now. He cut his connection with Cerberus and prayed.

Burst Out.

Everything rapidly grew distant, but Fairy's sweet and sour voice chased him, echoing faintly from afar.

See you, Crow.

Something like the acceleration sound in reverse washed over Haruyuki, and his field of view was dyed white.

As Haruyuki woke up in the real world and the flash of dizziness that accompanied his return faded, he yanked himself upright. On either side of him, Fuko, Utai, Niko, and Kuroyukihime still had their eyes closed. If the mission had been canceled and they'd left through the nearest portal, then they would wake up in two seconds at the most.

But no one opened their eyes after two seconds had passed.

Two and a half...Three...Three and a half...More than an hour had passed in the Unlimited Neutral Field since Haruyuki had burst out. His palms were drenched with sweat. Did his message not get through? Had Kuroyukihime and the others begun the Genbu mission and been attacked by the Acceleration Research Society?

The timed disconnection safety was set for 10.8 seconds—three hours in the Accelerated World. So if he waited another seven seconds, no matter what was happening inside, they would all wake up. But those seven seconds felt like an eternity. He wanted to yank Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker off that very second, but he gritted his teeth and resisted the impulse.

And then, at basically the same time, all four girls opened their eyes. He peered into the eyes of Niko, immediately to his right.

Her gaze lost its focus for an instant. Her memories were being synced from her quantum circuits to her physical brain. She blinked twice before the brown eyes with flecks of green caught sight of him directly above her.

"...Uh, Haruyuki. Were you staring at my face this whole time?" she asked with a scowl, and he reflexively sat up straight and shook his head from side to side.

“N-no! How was the mission?! What about the Acceleration Research Society ambush?!”

Niko shoved his face out of the way with both hands before sitting up. Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Utai also pulled themselves up from the futon. The four of them looked at each other at the same time and nodded wordlessly.

“So then that voice was not a hallucination,” Kuroyukihime said, and a doubtfulness crept into her smile. “How on earth did you speak to me in the Unlimited Neutral Field? And how did you know that Vise and Argon were planning an ambush?”

There was no despair in her expression or voice. At the very least, it didn’t seem like the entire party had ended up in Unlimited EK at the Genbu gate. But in that case, why had it taken them so long to leave?

“Um,” Haruyuki replied, pushing down his desire to know the results. “After you all accelerated, I went to the Highest Level.”

“What? You called Metatron?” Kuroyukihime frowned, and he hurriedly waved his hands in denial.

“N-no! I wasn’t sure if I could...go by myself, but someone...” He glanced at Utai, and she blinked curiously at him. He didn’t believe that the voice he’d heard on the Noh stage of the Blue World was that of the real Kyoya Shinomiya, but he did want to go to that place again someday with Utai. With this thought in mind, he turned back to Kuroyukihime and explained.

“I probably had help from someone, so I was able to make the shift. When I looked at the area around the Genbu gate from there, I noticed Black Vise and them hiding inside the tower. Then Snow Fairy showed up and held me captive for a minute. But I managed to escape and warn you.”

“Is...that what happened...?” Kuroyukihime murmured, and Fuko, Niko, and Utai all let out a sigh at the same time.

“Honestly.” Fuko shook her head. “You never disappoint, Corvus. How many Burst Linkers are there in the Accelerated World who can actually make it to the Highest Level under their own power?”

“Oh, it wasn’t totally my own power, though. A-anyway, how was the

mission?! Did you all escape safely?!” Haruyuki leaned forward, and Niko shoved him back.

“Cool your jets, pal. I’ll tell ya from the start.”

“O-okay.”

“Well, we were all freaked, y’know? I mean, we’re walking down Yasukuni-dori, and suddenly Lotus is going on about how she can hear Crow talking. I was like, is this girl so far gone she’s hallucinating his voice now?”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?” Kuroyukihime glared at her, but Niko paid her no mind as she continued.

“So obvs, we were gonna stop moving, but Lotus was all, don’t stop. I guess that was ’cause Sleepy was watching us, then?”

“Mmm. Exactly.” Kuroyukihime nodded, and picked up the story there. “If Fairy noticed that we had stopped despite the fact that there were no Enemies around, she would have found out that we’d gotten the warning from Haruyuki. But if we simply continued as we were, Fairy would think the ambush hadn’t been discovered...was my thinking.”

“S-so then?” he urged her to continue.

“As we walked, I told Coba-Manga, Pound, and the other Legion leaders that I’d gotten a warning from you. That moment was the turning point for the mission.”

Haruyuki cocked his head to one side. What did she mean? That the turning point hadn’t happened after she got the warning, but rather the moment when she told the others?

Perhaps sensing his confusion, Kuroyukihime smiled. “Normally, none of them would have immediately believed that I had heard your voice. At the very least, they would have stopped and demanded an explanation. But...they believed it. Not me. They believed that Silver Crow, of all people, could make a miracle happen and contact a Burst Linker in the Unlimited Neutral Field from the outside.”

“...”

Haruyuki was speechless. He felt a small hand on his knee and looked over.

Utai nodded firmly, a serious look on her face, and typed on his knee. UI>OF COURSE, ALL OF US IN NEGA NEBULUS BELIEVED IT. NOT ONLY DID WE BELIEVE IT, WE DISCUSSED WHAT WE SHOULD DO AS WE WALKED.

“What you should do,” he repeated. “With an ambush waiting for you, wasn’t your only choice to leave and try again later?”

“That’s not Nega Nebulus’s style, Corvus,” Fuko noted, a smile on her face, as she straightened the slight crease in the collar of her white yukata, and Haruyuki stared dumbfounded. “While you’re accelerated, there is only the duel. That is our policy, yes?”

“B-but Black Vise and Argon Array were waiting for you! And Cerberus was there, too! It’s too dangerous to take them and Genbu on at the same time!”

“Naturally, we wouldn’t fight both at the same time,” Kuroyukihime said, and he turned to his right to look at her, still sitting formally on his knees. “Listen. Thanks to you, we learned that Vise and his group were waiting for us, right down to the spot where they were waiting. In other words, you gave us the chance to strike first.”

“S-strike first?” he repeated, and the look on Kuroyukihime’s face grew severe.

“We have one other important policy,” she noted. “Only use Incarnate techniques when attacked with Incarnate techniques. Do you know why?”

“Y-yes. When you use Incarnate indiscriminately, you end up a prisoner of the dark side of Incarnate. Right?”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded. “But there’s also one other extremely simple reason. A first strike with Incarnate techniques is simply too powerful. Only Incarnate can guard against Incarnate attacks. There’s no point in merely taking on a defensive stance. But in the event that you are taken completely by surprise, the chance of being able to mount an Incarnate defense in time is low.”

She was exactly right.

The reason the members of the Black Legion had been essentially annihilated

in the opening stages of the Territories with the White Legion three days earlier was because Glacier Behemoth and Snow Fairy had gotten a first strike in against them with the extremely powerful second-stage Incarnate techniques Last Glacial Period and Brinicle. If those had been regular special attacks, it would've been possible for Nega Nebulus to respond, but they'd been unable to break the ice prison that Behemoth had created or guard against the chilly tornado Fairy had produced. Add in the Acceleration Research Society, and Kuroyukihime and their comrades had been hit with Incarnate technique surprise attacks any number of times, so there was no need to be ashamed of playing the same trick this time.

But there was still an issue.

"So then you were going to attack—I mean, you did attack Black Vise and them with an Incarnate first strike? But they already knew what route you were taking," he said. "Wouldn't a surprise attack be impossible?"

"It's 'cause you told us exactly where they were," Niko replied, as she flicked a hand to call up a three-dimensional map of Tokyo. She shared it with Haruyuki and the others, swiping at it to move to Kitanomaru Park.

"See? Here's the tower of the Palace's side building where they were waiting. And *this* is our route."

Niko tapped the map, and the commercial building with the round towers he'd seen from the Highest Level lit up in red, while the roads from Yasukuni-dori past Kitanomaru Park and up to Inuimon, the north gate of the Imperial Palace, lit up in blue.

"They were prolly watchin' us with Argon's X-ray ability to make objects transparent. So once the attack on Genbu started on the bridge, they were gonna come flying outta the tower and catch us in a wedge. But there's some stuff in the Unlimited Neutral Field that even Argon can't see through."

"Huh?" He frowned. "Like the Castle walls?"

"Those, too," she agreed. "But other stuff just lying around. Like, here. The inside of the Museum of Modern Art."

"...?"

Cocking his head to one side, he stared at the simple square building and then he suddenly understood. “Oh! A portal?!”

“Zactly!” Niko said. “I got an ability, this vision extension that can fake transparency with a heat scan, but I totes can’t see anyone on the other side of a portal. I figured it’s prolly the same for Argon.”

“M-makes sense.” He dropped his gaze to the 3D map once again and pointed at the roads in blue. “So then you moved along here like this and the second you entered the line of sight with the portal between you and the tower, you struck first with Incarnate techniques?”

“Yup. No collision detection for portals, neither. Attacks just slip right on through ‘em.” Niko grinned, and on the other side of her, Kuroyukihime shrugged.

“Although it wasn’t as easy as Niko makes it sound. We assembled all the Burst Linkers with long-distance Incarnate techniques in the center of the formation while we moved, and they attacked in sync on my signal. It’s a good thing we’d already done the same maneuver once, up against Tezcatlipoca.”

“D-did it work?”

“It’s because it did that we are sitting here leisurely explaining it to you,” Kuroyukihime said proudly, and Utai quickly added.

UI> IT WAS INCREDIBLE. THE MUSEUM EXPLODED, AND ALL THESE DIFFERENT COLORED INCARNATE TECHNIQUES WENT WHOOSH!

For once, the look on her face was childlike, and Haruyuki couldn’t help but smile. The corners of Kuroyukihime’s mouth also went up, but her face was soon serious again.

“That said, however, Black Vise seemed to notice the attack immediately before it hit and fled with Argon using his ability to hide in the shadows. Rust Jigsaw and Shadow Cloaker, however, died instantly. But Wolfram Cerberus...he withstood a direct hit from over ten Incarnate techniques and charged us.”

“What?!” Haruyuki clutched his hands into fists on his lap and asked in a small voice, “Then...you fought Cerberus?”

“The thing there is, well, something strange happened.”

“Strange?” He raised an eyebrow.

Kuroyukihime nodded and looked at Fuko, as if to hand her the baton. Haruyuki hurriedly turned to Fuko, who blinked once as if checking her memory.

“I saw it from the closest,” she said quietly. “Cerberus came at us at first in the Armor of Catastrophe’s usual berserker state, but once he passed the portal, he suddenly slowed down. Quite awkwardly. Almost as though the Burst Linker inside was resisting the duel avatar’s movement.”

Kuroyukihime, Utai, and Niko all wordlessly indicated their agreement with Fuko’s statement.

“S-so then what happened?” he asked.

“Cerberus moved like a broken robot into the portal and disappeared,” Fuko replied.

“...”

What if.

What if exactly what Fuko said happened actually did happen? Cerberus had resisted the destructive impulse of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. And then he had escaped the control of the Armor for long enough to leave the Unlimited Neutral Field.

“Cerberus.” The corners of his eyes grew hot. He hurriedly squeezed them shut and took a deep breath.

He didn’t know what had actually happened. But at the very least, Cerberus’s own will hadn’t disappeared yet. The boy holding his knees inside the raging darkness Haruyuki had sensed on the Highest Level was still desperately trying to protect himself.

In order to free him from the Armor of Catastrophe and the chains of the Acceleration Research Society, Haruyuki himself had to smash his own Unlimited EK.

“What about Snow Fairy?!” he demanded, suddenly remembering. “Didn’t she come and get in the way?”

“No, she didn’t show herself,” Fuko told him. “It seems that her role this time was at most as observer.”

“Huh...” But the time would soon come when they would fight her again. Mentally preparing himself for this, Haruyuki gave voice to his final question. “So then did you carry out the Genbu mission? How did it go?”

The four high rankers all looked at each other and smiled at the same time. Kuroyukihime cleared her throat.

“A message from Graphite Edge for you: ‘If you want to learn Ain style, I’ll teach you loads in the Unlimited Neutral Field.’”

When they were done explaining everything to Haruyuki, it was just past ten thirty PM. For the junior high and high school students, it was a bit early, but it was pretty much bedtime for an elementary school student. It would indeed be cramped for all five of them to use the two futons laid out in Utai's room, so it was decided that the older three would sleep in the larger guest room across the hall.

After saying good night to Niko and Utai, Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime, and Fuko did a bit more homework at the low table in the guest room—although Haruyuki was working on the draft for his student council election speech—and worked right up until it was almost a new day before getting ready for bed. Once they put the table away, there was plenty of room for three futons, and Haruyuki was secretly relieved at the extra space. He felt like he would be able to sleep now in a room with two older girls.

They changed into the lightweight nightclothes that Shiomi had left out for them, turned off the light, and climbed into their futons, and Haruyuki relaxed his head onto a pillow that rustled but had a strangely pleasing feel to it before moving to take off his Neurolinker.

From the central futon, Fuko turned to where he lay on the hallway side of the room. "That reminds me, Corvus."

"Wh-what?"

"I heard you and Sacchi took a bath together at her house?"

"Nngh?!" He choked a little, like the air had gotten into a weird place in his lungs. After somehow managing to get breathing properly again, he called out weakly to the other girl on the far side of the room, "K-Kuroyukihime..."

“Oh. I didn’t mean to tell her all of that, but...” Kuroyukihime’s apologetic voice came through the faint darkness. “When we were in the bath tonight, I showed Fuko the barcode on my neck.”

“...!”

Haruyuki reflexively raised his head a little. But the strength quickly ran out of his shoulders and sent it back down to the pillow. If Kuroyukihime had shared the secret of her birth with Fuko as well, that was definitely a good thing. “Y-you did?”

“Mmm. And so, while I was telling her all about it, I ended up mentioning that I’d shown you the barcode. And I accidentally said ‘in the bath.’”

“...You...did...”

Well, if it came out naturally like that, Fuko won’t read anything weird into it, Haruyuki thought.

However.

“So then, Corvus, how was it?”

He heard Fuko’s voice once more and Haruyuki glanced over at her. But he could only just barely make out the silhouette of her face in profile; he couldn’t see the expression on it. “H-how was what?”

“Having a bath with Sacchi. How was it?”

The voice that questioned him was nothing if not gentle, but when it came to Fuko, he couldn’t take gentle at face value. Sweat oozing from the palms of his hands, he chose each word carefully as he replied.

“W-well, I was surprised at first, but I was super happy that Kuroyukihime told me all these things she’d had locked up inside for so long. I felt like I wanted to be there for her even more now.”



“Thank you, Haruyuki,” came Kuroyukihime’s quiet voice in the gloom, and he felt his heart grow warm abruptly.

However.

“That’s not what I meant, Corvus.” Fuko sounded even gentler now. “I mean, how was it, as a teenage boy, seeing Sacchi naked?”

“Nawhaa?!” This bizarre sound came from Haruyuki, and Kuroyukihime also cried out in a hushed voice.

“O-oi! What are you saying, Fuko?!”

“Well, I’ve always felt that one of Corvus’s good points is that he isn’t ravenous in that way, so we can relax around him as BB girls. But this does have me a little worried. You’re lying here about to fall asleep with Sacchi and me, but I do wonder if absolutely nothing will happen?”

His only choice here was to accelerate.

No. If he just burst-linked, Fuko might come after him in a normal duel, and he couldn’t enter the Unlimited Neutral Field. So then should he flee to the Highest Level? But what would he do if Snow Fairy showed up again? If he asked Fairy how a junior high boy should respond when interrogated about his physical urges by a high school girl, would she tell him? And how old was she anyway?

After racing through these panicked thoughts in 0.3 seconds, he timidly replied, “I-I-I mean, it’s not like I feel nothing. Of course, I’m nervous. But no matter which way you look at it, you and Kuroyukihime would never allow any... inappropriate action from me, Master.”

This was the answer his brain earnestly put out.

For some reason, Fuko sighed. “Well, I’ll go along with that for the time being. But, listen, Corvus. When the time comes that this is no longer an unforgivable act, you have to choose just one person and really cherish her, all right?”

“Y-yeah.”

“And Sacchi, you. Barging into the bath naked, what were you intending to do if Corvus ran wild on you?”

“R-ran wild? Listen, Fuko,” Kuroyukihime started, but the older girl cut her off.

“From now on, restrain from such indiscretion. It’s good for the Legion that we have this kind of rich exchange in real life, but as your elder, I will not allow any corruption of our morals.”

Does she want me to do something or not? Maybe I should make a barricade with an extra futon, so I don’t roll over toward her while I’m sleeping.

These thoughts running through his brain, Haruyuki pulled the thin blanket up to his chin.

A sunny Wednesday, July 24.

Having feasted on the very Japanese-style breakfast of grilled salmon, boiled *komatsuna* greens in soy sauce, slow-boiled *onsen tamago* eggs, rice, and miso soup made by Fuko and Utai, Haruyuki helped clean up before leaving the Shinomiya house with Niko at seven forty-five. Niko had apparently eaten a little too much, so they made their way slowly down the narrow road of the residential area until they came out on Ring Road No. 7. They got on a bus at the Honancho intersection and sat down alongside each other in a two-person seat.

Niko pulled a red XSB cable out of the purse slung across her small body. As she connected it to her Neurolinker with her left hand, she held out the plug at the opposite end. Haruyuki hesitated briefly before taking it between his fingertips.

The bus was about seventy percent full, and the passengers included junior high and high schoolers on their way to some kind of team practice. It would have been a lie to say he wasn’t aware of their eyes on him, but Niko was bold and proud, so Haruyuki couldn’t flinch here. The instant he connected the magnetized terminal with a click, he heard Niko’s neurospeak in his mind.

“Hey, Haruyuki. You know how Hoo came up over breakfast?”

“Huh? You wanted to direct for this?”

“Whatevs. Why not? Anyway, about Hoo.”

“Uh-huh.” Haruyuki waited for her to continue.

Just as Niko said, the main topic of conversation over breakfast had been Hoo. When Utai invited Haruyuki and Niko over to her house, she'd said she wanted to discuss something about Hoo with them, but their time had been taken up with the Genbu mission and their summer homework, so she hadn't really been able to bring it up.

The first item on her agenda was taking measures against the extreme heat of the height of summer. Hoo might have been an African owl, but it was indeed harsh to leave him outside when the temperature rose to over thirty-five degrees Celsius. And the second item was what to do about the owl during the planned trip to Yamagata for all the Legion members at the beginning of August. This was the more difficult problem, and their choices were to leave him with someone or take him with them, but in reality, both of these were relatively difficult.

There were pet hotels that would take in owls, but as a rule, Hoo would only eat from Utai's hand. Recently, he'd been eating from Haruyuki's hand—and the day before from Reina Izeki's, but that was because Utai had been right there with her gentle presence. If she wasn't around, he wouldn't even look at the offered food.

Taking him on the trip was also not practical. Because of his past experiences, Hoo was extremely sensitive. It had taken a fair bit of time for him to grow accustomed to his current hutch, so the stress of being in a carrier and traveling for several hours would be too great. And they didn't know if he would settle down at Haruyuki's grandparents, where they would be staying.

When Utai explained all this, Haruyuki understood that she was thinking that the only option was for her to stay behind. But that was just too much. The trip to Yamagata was the reward awaiting them after the long and painful battle against the Acceleration Research Society and the White Legion. Haruyuki had already called his grandfather and asked if he could bring around fifteen friends and gotten his ready consent. He hadn't explained yet how he knew these friends, and his grandparents might be stunned when they saw the group of girls, the only boys being himself and Takumu, but it was sure to be a fun trip.

But that was only because they would all be there.

If Utai couldn't go—a core member of the Legion in the mock battle against the Green King, in the Territories with the White Legion, in the mission against Inti, and in the attack on Genbu the night before—then he almost thought it was better to cancel the trip entirely. But Utai would definitely not accept that option. He was sure she'd put on her usual smile and tell them to go have fun, not to worry about her...

Haruyuki started to hang his head, and then Niko's voice echoed in his mind again.

"So, like, I dunno if this'd be a thing yet, so I didn't mention it to Maiden, but you know our Pokki, yeah?"

"Pokki...You mean Thistle Porcupine?" he said, an image of the porcupine avatar with the rare fluffy hair armor floating up in his mind.

"Yeah." Niko nodded firmly. *"I'm pretty sure she's got this huuuuge bird for a pet in the real."*

"What?! Even though she's a porcupine?!"

"That's not the important part," Niko pointed out, and he hurried to correct himself.

"A-a huge bird? Is it an owl?"

"Dunno, but I feel like she mentioned it eats meat, so I think it's prob'ly a bird of prey. Parrots and stuff don't eat meat, right?"

"I-I don't think so." Here Haruyuki finally saw where this was going and glanced at Niko next to him. *"Um. So then you're saying get Thistle to take care of Hoo?"*

Instantly, the red pigtailed swung from side to side. *"Don't get ahead of yerself here. This is totally a what-if kinda deal. I haven't checked with Pokki, and anyway, I've never even met her in the real, so."*

"What? Really?" Haruyuki said, and Niko shrugged, the shoulders of her short-sleeved blouse bobbing up and down.

"That's the usual, y'know. Negabu's the weird one with all the Legion members cracked in the real. But, like...lately, I been thinking I could maybe get

a bit closer to the core of Promi—I mean, the former Promi.”

“Yeah, that’d be good.” Haruyuki nodded.

Niko glared at him out of the corner of her eye. *“I’ll tell you right now, you’re comin’ with me when I go ask her.”*

“H-Huh?!”

“Obvs. You’re the Animal Care Club president. But, y’know, I gotta check what kinda bird Pokki has first, and then talk to Maiden—Ui. An’ we don’t know if Hoo’ll let her feed him even if Pokki does say yes.”

“Yeah...”

It was true that it was unlikely that Hoo would accept food from the hand of a new person whom he would be meeting for the first time in an unfamiliar place, all without Utai. He might fight with this “huuuuge bird” that Thistle had, too. That said, the final decision would be made by super president Utai.

“Thanks, Niko.” Haruyuki sent her a thought of gratitude, and Niko shrugged again.

“Anyway, isn’t your stop next?”

“Huh? Oh! You’re right!”

When he looked out the window, the bus had at some point crossed Ume Kaido and was now approaching the Chuo Line elevated bridge. Haruyuki hurriedly raised a hand to press the stop button displayed on his virtual desktop.

8:15 AM.

Arriving at his condo, Haruyuki went against the flow of people to cut across the front entrance and jumped into the elevator. He replayed the conversation with Niko inside the empty carriage, and then had the sudden thought that he should invite Trilead on the Yamagata trip, too. He had never met him in the real world, and they’d basically never even touched on the real world in their conversations, so he didn’t know if he’d accept, but Haruyuki would feel a lot more comfortable with three boys there.

He got out of the elevator and walked down the hallway to the Arita

apartment. Thinking that his mother was probably still asleep, he carefully opened the front door and snuck into the living room on quiet feet. But there he ran into his mother coming out of the kitchen. He blinked a few times before opening his mouth.

“I’m home. Morning, Mom.”

His mother—Saya Arita—nodded slightly, holding a porcelain teacup in one hand. “Morning.” She walked past him to the dining table, her glossy nightgown swinging. When she sat down, she took a sip of tea and started to flick at her virtual desktop.

Haruyuki also went into the kitchen and first washed his hands before opening the refrigerator. He checked the contents as he pulled out a bottle of barley tea and found that the wraps, the canapés, the lasagna, and all the other leftovers from the send-off party the day before yesterday had disappeared. His mother had probably eaten them for lunch and supper the previous day.

He drank a glass of barley tea before setting down the carrier bag still slung across him and pulling out a bioplastic container. He was about to put it in the refrigerator but then stopped and called across the counter, “Mom, do you want some onigiri?”

“Onigiri?” His mother looked up from her desktop with a doubtful expression. “Did you buy some downstairs?”

“No, a friend made them at the house where I was staying over last night.” He had lied to his mother about a number of things in relation to the Accelerated World, but this was the truth. Fuko had made onigiri with the leftover rice and grilled salmon and had given him three to take.

“Hmm. What’s in them?”

“S-salmon.”

“Okay, I’ll have one. Can you make some miso soup, too? Instant’s fine.”

“Okay.”

As he turned on the electric kettle with his right hand, Haruyuki got a bowl and a square plate out with his left. He put a dried cube of wakame and green

onion miso soup in the bowl and poured the boiling water in before setting the onigiri on the plate and carrying it all to the table. He sat down as well and pretended to open his virtual desktop as he looked at his mother's face.

She took a sip of the miso soup before biting into the onigiri. The look on her face didn't change, but it didn't seem like she was unhappy with the taste, since she kept eating it.

It's almost Mom's birthday, too, he thought suddenly.

When Saya was a twenty-three-year-old master's student, she had married a man three years older and given birth to Haruyuki. This was fairly early back then, when late marriages were the norm. Even when her birthday came this year, she would be only thirty-eight. Her slanted bob cut was shiny, and her profile was just as sharp as ever, but in the bright morning light, he felt like he could sense a little exhaustion in the skin around her eyes.

And it was no wonder. Working in the trade department of a foreign investment bank, Saya had irregular work hours because she was active in international currency markets, and there were plenty of days when she had to have a drink with clients. And even when she was at home, she was always checking market trends with her Neurolinker, so her brain didn't ever get much of a rest. He felt like she didn't need to work so hard, but it was because she did that Haruyuki could live in this condo and invite over a dozen or more Legion comrades to this spacious living room.

That said, however, he did have occasion to wonder about how she had completely abandoned the cooking side of things. But if he was unhappy with instant meals, he could just improve upon them himself. The much-younger Utai had mastered the kitchen knife, so he couldn't say that it was beyond him. Thinking he might tackle a simple meal that very evening, he stared absently at his mother eating the onigiri.

"So this Animal Care Club camp, what did you do, exactly?" she asked abruptly.

"Um," he said. "Talked about the animal we're taking care of at school. And did our summer homework. We gamed a little bit, too."

"Animal? So what, a rabbit?"

“No, it’s a northern white-faced owl.”

Saya lifted her gaze from her virtual desktop, her face softening a little. “Oh my, a white face, hmm?”

“A-a white face?” he repeated. “People call them that?”

“They do.” She nodded. “You know, I wanted one a long time ago.”

“Huh. You wanted an owl?”

“A looooong time ago,” she said. “Your grandparents up in Yamagata, they have the cherry orchard, right? A lot of pests come for the cherries. Birds like sparrows and starlings and bulbuls, animals like field mice, civets. And bears.”

“B-bears?!” He gaped at her. “Bears come to the cherry orchard?”

“A long, long time ago, they did. Now we have the high-performance electric fence, so they can’t get in. But the birds and the mice aren’t stopped by the fence. So you set up a nest in the orchard and have an owl live there.”

“Wow...”

“When I was little, a long-eared owl lived in the nest in our field,” she told him. “Normally, the owls of the north move south in the winter, but this one never budged from the orchard. I guess it was there for six or seven years. But when I was in junior high, it suddenly disappeared. I don’t know what happened to it, but I was so sad. So I decided that when I grew up and was living on my own, I would have an owl as a pet.”

Given that Saya was estranged from her family, it was relatively rare for her to talk about her childhood. To the point where he couldn’t remember any such talk over the last few years.

So Mom was a kid once, too, living at Grandma and Grandpa’s in Yamagata. As this thought passed through his mind, he asked, “You didn’t get your owl?”

“I’m sure you know if you’re taking care of a white face at school, but there are a lot of steep hurdles to clear to keep a bird of prey as a pet. I kept thinking ‘one day, one day,’ and then I forgot at some point.” A faint smile crossed her face, and she finished off her tea. “Thanks for the onigiri. It was good. What are you up to today?”

“Um. I’m going back to school around lunch.”

“Be careful not to get heatstroke,” she said as she charged 500 yen in lunch money to his Neurolinker and stood up. She carried her dishes to the kitchen, and for a moment, Haruyuki wanted to stop her.

He still had things he wanted to talk about. Like would she come to school and see Hoo, or would she come with them to Yamagata, or what kind of person was his father...But he was afraid of being rejected and closed his mouth.

Saya quickly washed her dishes and was about to step into the living room. But she stopped in front of the door and looked back. “That reminds me. Did you manage to write your student council election speech?”

“Oh. Y-yeah.” He flicked at his virtual desktop and sent the draft file to her.

“I’ll make some notes in the next couple days and send them to you, okay?”

“Take your time. There’s no rush.”

“If I think like that, I’ll forget,” she replied, followed by the sound of the door opening and closing.

Returning to his room, Haruyuki made some progress on his summer homework before taking a shower and leaving the house at eleven.

The skies were clear again that day, but a dry wind was blowing from the east, making the heat much more bearable than the day before. A typhoon had sprung up on the southern seas, and there was talk of its making landfall on Honshu in a few days, but the fine weather was supposed to continue through the beginning of August, when their trip to Yamagata was scheduled.

When he arrived at school, he first went and said hello to Hoo and got to work cleaning the hutch area. The trees dropped a surprising number of leaves even in the summer, so if he didn’t make sure to sweep them away every day, they would pile up here and there.

He was almost done when Utai and Reina Izeki showed up and gave him a scare. It was his day on duty, so Reina was supposed to take the day off. When he pointed this out, she told him that he had come the day before.

And just like the day before, the three of them finished taking care of Hoo and then said their good-byes in the front courtyard. Haruyuki ate the bread he had bought in the cafeteria—which was open, but not serving hot lunch—as was his custom, moved to the library, and continued working on his homework. In the evening, once their practice was done, he joined up with Chiyuri and Takumu, had some fruit *anmitsu* at their usual sweet shop, Enjiya, and then went home.

His mother had already gone to work and left a message that she wouldn't be back until late the next night. Even so, Haruyuki went shopping for ingredients at the supermarket in his building to prepare supper himself and ran into Chiyuri once more there. When he was forced to explain what he was shopping for, she ended up following him home for some reason and butting in from the sidelines while he cooked.

He could no longer say that the meal was one hundred percent his effort, but the fact that the resulting chicken sauté and broad bean salad were more or less edible was likely thanks to Chiyuri. She sat down to eat it with him as if it were only natural, and then he saw her off at the door. When he got back to the living room and looked at the clock, it was exactly seven. The sky beyond the windows was dyed red with the afterglow, and one or two stars had started to shine. Closing the curtains, he went over his day in his mind. Overall, it had been very peaceful, quiet, and fun.

Later, he would have occasion to recall this ordinary and thus priceless day.

After putting his uniform in the washing machine and rinsing the sweat off his body in the bathroom, Haruyuki put on some shorts and a T-shirt, brushed his teeth, and went back to his bedroom.

The start time for the mission to rescue Silver Crow was eleven that night, with a full dive meeting for all the participants an hour before that. It was just past seven thirty, so he still had more than two hours to go. He lay down in bed, wondering if he should work on his homework, play a game he hadn't finished yet, or watch a video.

Then in the center of his mind, he heard a sound he had been eagerly awaiting—the ringing of a clear, ephemeral bell.

“...!!”

A jolt ran through him, and he hurriedly rested his head on the pillow before taking as deep a breath as he could.

“Unlimited—” He clamped his mouth shut. He couldn’t exactly go to the Unlimited Neutral Field. Deeply annoyed, he shouted a new command:

“Burst Link!”

Skreeeeeeee!! The sound of acceleration cut Haruyuki’s mind away from the real world.

When he appeared in the Blue World in his pink pig avatar, just as he had the previous day, Haruyuki bounced once on his bottom before immediately standing up and looking for something that could be the gate for him to go to the Highest Level—an object to focus his mind and thrust his fists at. But the only furniture in his room was the desk, the bookshelf, and the bed; there wasn't even a mirror.

Left with no other choice, he turned to the windows with the curtains still open and got into position, clenching his right hand into a fist. Fighting back the urge to hurry, he tried to remember the sensation when he had shifted the previous night at the Shinomiya house.

And then a minuscule dot flickered before his eyes. A white light that should not have existed in the Blue World. The dot lazily grew into a small circle, with a sharp spindle descending from it and wings growing from both sides. A pure white three-dimensional icon, clad in golden phosphorescence.

“Huh?!” A cry of surprise slipped out of him, and he tentatively reached out with his readied right hand to try and touch the icon.

“How many times must I tell you not to touch me so casually, servant?!”

It was a clear voice, sounding like the most exquisite music under the sun to him, one he'd waited so, so long to hear again: the overbearing and yet somehow gentle voice of the Archangel.

“Metatron!” he cried hoarsely, and leapt toward the icon, his short pig arms open wide, fully prepared to be scolded once more. He held the small object—not even ten centimeters long—tightly to his chest and rasped, “You're back.”

He had been sure that she would immediately start berating him or else whap

him on the head with her wings, but the icon remained silent for the time being.

Finally, she slipped away from his arms and rose into the air. She stopped just out of reach of his pig avatar arms and spread her wings as far as they would go. In the next instant, a golden light dazzled the Blue World, and Haruyuki unconsciously closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, fearing that she had disappeared, he beheld the slender figure of a girl standing in front of the window. White dress and long, silver hair. White wings folded up on her back, a thin ring of light above her head. The second form of the Legend-class Enemy, the Archangel Metatron—her true form.

Before his dumbfounded eyes, Metatron slowly moved her beautiful countenance from side to side, eyes still closed, and said, “This...does not appear to be the Lowest Level.”

“N-no.” Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down. Top-level Beings like Metatron called the Unlimited Neutral Field the Mean Level—“mean” meaning “in the middle,” apparently—the regular duel stage the Low Level, and the real world the Lowest Level. Naturally, she had never seen the real world, and this would have also been her first experience with the Blue World. “We call this the initial acceleration space or the Blue World. It’s like...a space that connects the Lowest Level and the Low Level.”

“Well then, does that mean that this drab room is a re-creation of the room you live in on the Lowest Level, servant?”

“I-it does.” He nodded, and the Archangel gazed around from on high.

“And what is this form you’ve taken?” she asked doubtfully.

“Oh. This. Um. It’s like the avatar I use when I dive in VR spaces on the Lowest Level. Does that make sense?”

“You mean the form you take when you enter a world other than BB 2039, yes?” Metatron responded, before bending over and violently grabbing both of his pig avatar’s long, slender ears. She raised the flailing Haruyuki up to the same height as her own face and furrowed her brow slightly. “Servant, it is

incredible that you would use such an embodiment and yet dare to call my own an insect or a pet.”

“I-it wasn’t me who said that!” he protested desperately as he stared intently at the face of the Archangel before him.

The same transcendental beauty he’d first seen at Tokyo Midtown Tower. He sensed no sign of damage, but the wounds that Metatron had incurred in the battle with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, couldn’t be seen from the outside.

“Metatron...Is your recovery done?” he asked, ever so timidly, and the Being lightly shrugged the wings on her back.

“I called you because it was complete. Normally, I would summon you to Fufuan on the Mean Level, but it would no doubt take you more than a hundred seconds to make that move, so I generously came to you.”

“Th-thanks.” He tried to bow his head at the Archangel’s thoughtful gesture, but he was still dangling by the ears, so all that happened was his body rocked back and forth.

In fact, it was about ten kilometers from the Arita home in Koenji to Fufuan in Shiba Park, so even if Silver Crow flew at a speed of 100 kilometers per hour, it would still take him six minutes—about three hundred sixty-four seconds. And he had another reason he couldn’t make the trip now, even if Metatron had summoned him there.

“I’m glad you came,” he said. “The truth is, I can’t enter the Mean Level right now.”

“Hmm?” Metatron cocked her head to one side questioningly. “I blocked all information output while in recovery, but I still monitored the barest minimum of sensory information through the link with you. I assume you succeeded in your attack on that burning ball—Inti?”

“Y-yeah, basically.”

“I ended my monitoring there to devote all my resources to my recovery, however,” she said with a sniff. “Did something happen after this attack?”

“Uh, um,” he stammered, unsure where to start.

“It’s fine,” Metatron said impatiently. “I shall refer directly to your memories.”

“What?!” he cried. “I thought you could only do that on the Highest Level?!”

“I told you that I would enhance the link while recovering. Now it’s possible to share memories as long as we exist on the same level. As we do now.”

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than Metatron brought Haruyuki dangling from her hand up close to her face and touched their foreheads together.

Crack! He felt something like a spark. A massive amount of information was copied from his quantum thought circuits to hers.

Even after she finished referencing his memories, Metatron didn’t move her hand. After a few seconds, he heard a faint voice very close to his pig ears. “Tezcatlipoca.”

The Archangel finally released the contact between their foreheads, but rather than lowering him to the ground, she pressed him to her chest. Stunned, Haruyuki felt his whole body enveloped in something soft and warm, but the Archangel herself seemed to be unaware of her own action. He got the instinctual impression that a large quantity of information was being processed beneath her closed eyelids.

Finally...



“An execution device to close the world. That such a thing was inside of Inti...”

Her murmured words closely resembled those of Centaurea, but they had a far more serious ring to them now.

It was only natural. Haruyuki and the other Burst Linkers wouldn't lose their actual lives if the Accelerated World disappeared. But Metatron and the other Beings would vanish in every sense of the word if this world were to disappear.

Wait.

The reason for Sentry's casual tone wasn't because she was making light of the giant, since they wouldn't actually die. It was because she was trying to encourage Haruyuki and the others and give them some peace of mind. Losing Brain Burst was the same as actual death—the majority of Burst Linkers no doubt secretly held this belief in their hearts, and Sentry, having managed to come back to life once already, would have been largely frightened because she truly knew what death meant.

He couldn't let the world end. For Metatron's sake, and for the sake of every Burst Linker.

“It's okay, Metatron.” He raised his face, still pressed to the Archangel's chest. “We're totally not going to let this world be closed. The White King and the other Oscillatory members talk like there's no avoiding the end, but I don't think that's true. I mean, we're making progress, albeit only a little at a time. We're getting closer to our goal of attacking the Castle and reaching the final Arc, the Fluctuating Light. One step at a time.”

“Crow.” Metatron murmured his avatar name instead of “servant” and suddenly opened her closed eyelids. Her divinely golden eyes stared intently at the pink pig buried in her own chest. “C-come now! What are you doing?! The nerve! A mere servant!” She grabbed Haruyuki's ears and tossed him away.

“Wah! Y-you were the one who hugged me!”

As he bounded across the blue floor, he was happy. *This absurdity is really Metatron.*

Before he knew it, nearly half an hour had passed, and the end of his

acceleration was approaching, so Haruyuki hurriedly explained that evening's mission to Metatron.

Six people would simultaneously destroy the six Luminary crowns that bound Tezcatlipoca, and he would use the opening that created to escape. Centaurea Sentry would lend Metatron a blade to use. And the meeting at ten would take place in a dive chat in the real world, but they were planning to talk to Metatron at Fufuan or somewhere in the Unlimited Neutral Field to confirm the mission details.

The Archangel nodded once. "Indeed, if you assemble a group with skills on par with those of Graphite Edge, it would be possible to destroy those despicable crowns of thorns. In fact, the issue is what comes after...the escape."

"Huh?" He frowned at her.

"When you destroyed the crown that bound my first form at Midtown Tower, that form was immobilized for seven seconds. You and I will be able to fly to a safe distance in that time, but what about the other five? There is no guarantee that they will indeed be able to flee a safe distance merely running along the earth."

"Oh..."

She was exactly right. The five attackers besides Metatron—Trilead Tetroxide, Cyan Pile, Centaurea Sentry, Lavender Downer, and Graphite Edge—would have to escape on their own feet after the execution of the mission. But no matter how fleet of foot they might have been, the distance that could be run in seven seconds was between a hundred and two hundred meters. The Tokyo Grand Castle site was a square kilometer, so the distance from Tezcatlipoca in its center to the main gate was about five hundred meters. It was absolutely impossible to run this in seven seconds.

"..."

She made him realize that he'd been so totally focused on his own escape from Unlimited EK, he'd neglected the safety of his comrades, and Haruyuki hung his head.

But his ears were again grabbed forcefully. Lifting his pig avatar, Metatron

had the slightest air of hesitation, made clear by her lowered eyelashes, before she held him to her chest once more.

“Rest easy, Crow.”

“Huh?”

“I will evacuate the other five. You think only of your own escape.”

“B-but! If you try to carry five people, Metatron, your speed will—” he argued.

“Who do you think I am, exactly?” The Archangel poked his forehead lightly with an index finger. “Now that I have recovered my full strength, it is nothing to me to carry a mere five little warriors.”

“Th-then at least take the Metatron Wings.” He tried to return the Enhanced Armament she had given him, but this, too, was rejected with a fingertip.

“Our link is incorporated into them. You cannot remove them. If I say it’s all right, then it’s all right. I could fly all the way to my own castle in seven seconds,” the Archangel boasted and then smiled gently. She used both hands this time to set Haruyuki’s avatar down on the bed; her fingertips were slowly disappearing. “Now then. I will await Graphite Edge and the others at Fufuan. Oh, yes.”

Just as she was on the verge of leaving the initial acceleration space, Metatron added in a small voice, “I do not dislike this embodiment of yours.”

When his acceleration ended, Haruyuki sent a mail to Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and Seri that Metatron had fully recovered. During the time he had left to wait after that, he opened up a 3D map provided by Tokyo Grand Castle and focused on memorizing the terrain to the extent possible. His role was to take off from the balcony the instant the crowns were destroyed and escape in the direction that seemed safest. Depending on the situation, this might not be the skies above, but rather a flight skimming the ground. If he didn’t have the park terrain memorized, it could have a serious impact on his speed.

Soon.

If he and the six attackers could complete the mission closing in on him and

escape from Tezcatlipoca's reaction range, they would be able to shut down the scheme of the White Legion that had been ongoing since the Inti drop three days earlier—no, most likely the line could be traced much further back than that. He couldn't imagine what the giant would do when freed from the control of the Luminary, but even if, hypothetically, the White King did succeed in taming it again right away, she would no longer be able to set it upon any other Legion Burst Linkers in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Given how massive it was, they would be able to detect and evade it before it grew dangerously close, even if it did fly.

Just one more. If they could climb over just one more wall, they would at last be able to go beyond the calculations of Transient Eternity, White Cosmos. And they would climb it. Most definitely.

Suddenly, the last words he had heard from the White King on the balcony of Heimwert Castle came back to life in his ears:

And if you dive on your own at any other day and time than the one I specify, consider yourself dead a second later. And your comrades, as well, of course.

He shook his head fiercely and pushed away the syrupy echoes.

"As if I'll die. Not me, not them," he promised aloud and then turned his entire mind toward the 3D map open on his desk.

At nine thirty, Chiyuri and Takumu came to the Arita house together. They chatted happily while drinking the caffeine-free soy lattes with just a bit of sugar that Chiyuri had brought, and at ten o'clock, they sat together on the living room sofa and dived.

The meeting venue was once again the back of the flying whale Thalassa. The usual faces were there, but there was also one new participant from the Prominence side. Lavender Downer, whom Cassis Moose had referred to by the nickname of Tranquil.

Haruyuki had seen her at the Prominence merger meeting, but to be honest, she hadn't made a particularly strong impression on him. He remembered that her duel avatar was a small, slender F-type in a costume like a blazer-style uniform over pale-purple armor, but he had no memory of her having a sword. She had raised her hand in conditional agreement with the merger.

Her appearance in the dive chat also resembled her duel avatar. A subdued gray blazer with a lavender necktie—she was the only one there who was wearing anything that could have been seen on a person in the real world. Her shoulder-length hair was tied to one side behind her left ear, and she was wearing glasses with frames just a bit of a darker purple than her tie.

After Cassis Moose introduced her at the podium, Lavender Downer simply said, “Hello” and took a step to return to the general seating area. But a weasel in Japanese clothes—Centaurea Sentry—slipped out from the ranks and stopped her with one hand.

“It’s been a while, Lav.”

“CenSen...”

They referred to each other by nicknames of a close friendship, but made no move to shake hands. Instead, they faced each other wordlessly. The corners of Sentry’s mouth softened slightly.

“I appreciate your cooperation with this extremely dangerous mission. Our estimation was a forty percent chance of rejection.”

“I heard that Crow rescued Orkki and Rose, so...”

“I see. Incidentally, have you knowledge of the whereabouts of the other flowers?”

At this question that Haruyuki did not understand, Lavender Downer shook her head from side to side. “But I thought you and Orkki had lost all your points, and you’re both alive, so...”

“I suppose so. Well, we’ll tell our many stories after the mission.”

Lavender Downer nodded and returned to her seat, while Sentry looked around at the meeting participants and said to no one in particular, “Is that Anomaly not here?”

Indeed, he could see no avatar that might have been the central pillar of their attack, Graphite Edge.

“I’m terribly sorry.” Trilead stood up, an apologetic air bleeding out from his mask. “My master says he will join us in the Unlimited Neutral Field.”

“Hmph. He never changes. Raker, excuse our interruption. Please proceed.”

Having been given the floor by Sentry, Fuko stood behind the podium in the now thoroughly familiar teacher avatar and tapped on the blackboard behind her with a pointer. Drawn on it was an expressionless giant and an arrow pointing downward from above its head.

“Our strategy, as it were, is extremely simple. I will carry two attackers, Metatron three. We will take off from the Telecom Center Building, enter the sky above Tokyo Grand Castle, and drop the attackers above Tezcatlipoca. I will continue on my way in the direction of Wakasu, while Metatron will drop down with you. The six of you will sever your assigned crown and land on the ground. During the time Tezcatlipoca is rebooting after being freed from the tamed state, you will escape through the main gate in the west. Silver Crow will be given the signal through the link with Metatron and dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field, at which moment he will immediately escape in the safest direction. The end!”

As soon as Fuko had finished this fluent overview, Kuroyukihime raised a hand. “Raker, a question?”

“Go ahead, Lotus.”

“Perhaps it’s a bit late to be mentioning this, but aren’t we relying too heavily on Metatron when she’s only just recovered? Transport, attack, message—these are all key components.”

“You’re right.” Fuko nodded, a complicated look on her face. “But it really is impossible for me to carry six people, and their swords won’t reach the crowns on the head and chest from the ground. I considered all the options, and this is what I ended up with.”

“How about we at least only have her take care of transport and the message? In specific, the sixth attacker could be me—”

Instantly, not only Fuko, but all assembled in that place cried out as one: “Nooooo!!”

Kuroyukihime pursed her lips and pouted like a child, and muffled laughter rose here and there.

“Um.” Haruyuki quickly raised his own hand.

“Yes, Corvus?”

“When I was talking to Metatron before, she said it would be too hard for the other five attackers to escape on foot during the time Tezcatlipoca rebooted, so she’ll carry them when they escape.”

“...”

After being at a loss for words for a moment, Fuko smiled ruefully. “Then it seems we will just have to get a mountain of cakes for little Metako.”

They then went into a detailed run-through and the meeting ended at ten forty-five PM.

After that, the mission team would dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field and assemble at the base of the old Tokyo Tower. They would join Metatron, have one final meeting, and then head for Odaiba’s Telecom Center Building via the Rainbow Bridge. The rooftop heliport was over 120 meters off the ground, so it was just barely taller than Tezcatlipoca. If they took off from there, it would be possible for even Sky Raker’s Gale Thruster, with its limited energy, to carry two people and fly all the way to Tokyo Grand Castle. Metatron might say that she would carry five people both ways, but the faster their attack, the better.

If I was there, I could share the transport role, Haruyuki thought, but this time, at least, all he could do was sit and wait quietly for Metatron to contact him. Thanks to the bell he heard through their link, they could push his dive to the last possible second. According to the experiments done by those who had come before him, it was possible to stretch out the “t” for about two seconds after saying “Unlimited Burst,” so if he focused his mind to the limit, it was possible to cut the lag down to 0.1 seconds, or one minute and forty seconds in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

With Takumu, who had dived already, in between them, Haruyuki and Chiyuri looked at each other from either end of the sofa.

“It’ll be okay, Haru. Everything’s going to go fine,” Chiyuri said.

“Yeah.” He nodded gently, and then asked a question totally unrelated to the mission. “So does it look like you and Taku’ll be able to get out of practice for

the trip?”

Chiyuri shrugged. “I’ll be able to. But it’s right before the Kanto meet for Taku. He’s been really looking forward to the trip, though, so I think he’ll make it work.”

“Yeah? It’s just, if Taku doesn’t come, I’ll end up being the only boy,” Haruyuki said. “I’m going to invite Lead, though.”

His childhood friend returned a slight smile. “If it ends up being just you, your grandparents are gonna be surprised, I bet.”

“This is no joke. You have to help me figure out the most natural explanation for why we’re all friends.”

“Can’t you just be honest and say we game together?”

“My grandpa’s pretty into games. He’ll definitely ask which game.”

“Say we’re a fighting game club.”

“Okay, look...”

While they were chatting about nothing, eleven PM drew steadily nearer. The mission team should have already met up and started moving to Odaiba. If there were any problems, Metatron was supposed to let him know via their link, but he hadn’t heard any bells yet.

Suddenly, Chiyuri reached across Takumu’s body with her left hand, and Haruyuki took it in his right, and together they put their linked hands on top of the hands Takumu had folded across his stomach.

10:59. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds, forty seconds, fifty seconds. Fifty-five seconds. Six. Seven. Eight.

“Unlimited Burs...”

Ting! A bell sounded in the core of Haruyuki’s mind.

“...T!!”

The dry sound of acceleration cut his soul away from his physical body and sent it flying into the distance.

He opened his eyes.

A milky-white sky, like melted pearl. Below him stood a group of noble temples. The highest of the Sacred-types, a Sacred Ground stage.

This was a good sign. It would improve the status of the Archangel Metatron, and there were no gimmicks that might obstruct flight. It did have the characteristic that damage from long-distance attacks was reflected, but the attackers were all sword users, so there was no problem there.

Haruyuki shifted his gaze to the left.

An inky shadow rising up, a massive tower in the central plaza of Tokyo Grand Castle. The Super-class Enemy, the Deity of Demise, Tezcatlipoca.

It was already reacting to his appearance. White rings shone dully in its backlit face shrouded in blackness. *Krr, krr*. Its massive right hand moved.

Being hit by that just once risked immediate death. He wanted to spread his wings and take off right then and there, but he had to get its target off him first. Resisting his fear, he continued to glare at the giant.

In the sky far above, falling stars flashed. Streaks of blue and white light approaching from the northwestern sky. The blue slipped off to the south, while the white light plunged straight down. Around it, five shadows appeared—Metatron and the other attackers.

Tezcatlipoca was still targeting Haruyuki alone. A black circle darker than the shadows appeared in the hand turned toward him. Toxcatl—the gravitational wave attack. The circles grew in number in the blink of an eye. It was charging faster than when he'd seen this attack in Kitanomaru Park.

Haruyuki reflexively raised his hand. If the gravitational wave was launched, it could affect the trajectories of the falling attackers. He concentrated the image of light inside himself in this hand, compressed it as far as it was possible to compress, and released it.

“Light Veil!!”

A shining white, extremely thin film expanded into a sphere.

At the same time, a dark distortion was emitted from the giant’s right hand.

He didn’t know what kind of logic was used to process the two phenomena in the Accelerated World. But in Haruyuki’s view, the wall of photons instantly erased the ocean of gravitons released by Tezcatlipoca as it spread out to envelop the giant’s body.

The white falling star pierced this veil of light. The Archangel Metatron.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

With a powerful battle cry, she used both hands to bring down the massive sword lent to her by Centaurea Sentry. The blade sliced across the giant’s torso, drawing out a rainbow trail of light, and severed the largest crown embedded in its chest, while also damaging the crowns on the stomach and hips. Perhaps the power of the slicing attack reached even the main body—the giant reeled backward.

Close behind her were Cyan Pile and Trilead Tetroxide.

“Cyan Blade!”

“Heavenly Stratus!”

The Incarnate techniques shattered the crown on the right arm and cut through the one on the left.

And then two more people. Lavender Downer, pleated skirt flapping, and Centaurea Sentry, long silver hair swinging. Neither voiced the name of their attack, but rather brought their swords, cloaked in the thinnest, most powerfully concentrated overlay, down at impossible speeds. Third-stage Incarnate techniques.

The crowns on the stomach and hips split soundlessly at the same time and

fell away.

And then finally, the black avatar, clutching dual swords made of hyper diamond that powerfully reflected the gentle sunlight of the Sacred Ground stage, closed in on Tezcatlipoca's head. The final attacker, Graphite Edge.

The giant thrust its hand up thunderously and tried to bat him out of the air.

Graph pulled back the sword in his left hand, imbued it with red overlay, and thrust it out. The series of actions happened with such incredible speed that Haruyuki's eyes couldn't catch it all.

"Vorp! Strike!"

The red lance that stretched out from the sword pierced Tezcatlipoca's right hand.

The sword in Graph's left hand was immediately imbued with a faint white overlay before it gently touched the crown embedded on the giant's forehead.

For an instant, nothing happened.

But then—a line of light ran through the center of the crown and it split in half. The third-stage Incarnate technique, Elucidator.

All six of the crowns binding Tezcatlipoca had been completely destroyed in 0.5 seconds by the six swordmasters.

Krrrrrrrrnnnn...

Emitting a heavy low rumble that shook the stage, the giant stopped moving.

This was it. The top-class Enemy, now freed from the restraints of the Luminary, would need a minimum of seven seconds and a maximum of probably ten to restart. This was Haruyuki's first and last chance generated by the most powerful sword users come together to rescue him.

Fly!

The light of Incarnate gushing from the silver wings on his back, Haruyuki shot up into the sky.

"Light Speed!"

Now he could use up all of his image power. He had to fly. Up into the distant

heights where the White King's evil influence couldn't reach.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Metatron catch the falling swordmasters in a field of light and fly off to the west, almost scraping across the ground. She was probably mustering up whatever energy was left to her, too. She was magnificently fast, to the point where it was hard to believe she had five people on her back. They would easily make it off the Tokyo Grand Castle premises in seven seconds.

Soon.

Soon, it would all be over!

And then—

A wall of sound pushed up from behind him and drowned out everything else.

RR!

Instinctively, he looked back over his wings and saw Tezcatlipoca leaning forward, both hands clenched on either side of its body, howling with its entire being, throwing its head back as far as it would go, like some kind of beast.

A ring on its face distorted into an irregular shape, compressing into the periphery while expanding. There was a popping sound, and then a hole opened up in the center, where something like countless black planks popped up. They were...teeth. Not sharp fangs, but thin, flat, human teeth. The opening twisted in unfathomable rage and thirst, opening wide.

An inky Blast Wave was released in all directions from Tezcatlipoca's mouth.

Instantly, Haruyuki realized that the White King hadn't been controlling Tezcatlipoca with the Luminary crowns.

Naturally, she'd been giving it orders. But she'd actually kept it in check. She'd restrained the power of the rampaging Deity of Demise, keeping it at the level of a *Super-class Enemy*.

Bathed in the black shock wave, the white paving stones at the giant's feet cracked, circles radiating outward. The wall of Heimwert Castle shattered into pieces.

A second later, the Blast Wave caught up with Haruyuki as he shot into the

sky at top speed.

The metal fins that made up the wings on his back were ripped away, and cracks raced across the armor covering his body. The wave slammed into him with a power he'd never felt before, like several tons of steel smashing into his body. The health gauge in the top left of his field of view dropped nearly eighty percent all at once.

Having lost his wings, Haruyuki dropped into a tailspin, unable to keep himself upright, and fell into the roof of the tallest tower of Heimwert Castle. His health gauge dropped another ten percent and changed to a dull red.

But he yanked his head up and stared not at his own health gauge but rather toward the Grand Castle's main gate.

In exactly that moment, the Blast Wave swallowed the six members of the attacking team. Metatron's shining white wings scattered into countless feathers and were ripped out from the root. As she crashed and slid along the paving stones, the five swordmasters fell from her back and slammed into the ground or buildings.

"Aah...Aah!" Something like a shriek slipping out of him, Haruyuki tried to stand. But his avatar was deeply embedded in the roof, and he couldn't move. Perhaps the damage from the Blast Wave had reached all the way to his avatar's naked body; his movements were jerky and awkward.

Even so, he somehow managed to pull his right arm free of the rubble and turned it toward Tezcatlipoca's head.

"Over here, you monster!" he shouted in a hoarse voice and concentrated his almost zero Incarnate energy in his fingertips. He put the final image remaining to him into the irregularly flickering overlay and thrust his hand out.

"Laser Lance!"

The lance of light landed squarely on Tezcatlipoca's head, creating a dent about five centimeters deep. That was all. He couldn't even tell if the ten-stage gauge displayed above the giant's head dropped or not. Actually, he likely hadn't done any damage at all. He hadn't felt the force that should have been reflected back at him according to the nature of the stage.

As if sneering, Tezcatlipoca twisted the mouth in the center of its face and turned away from him. It raised its still-undamaged left hand toward the six fallen Burst Linkers. Haruyuki couldn't see them from where he lay, but he could imagine only too clearly the red rings carved into that palm.

"Graaar!"

A spinning vortex of flame was launched with this brief roar. The crimson line of fire, no doubt on par with or even more powerful than the flame breath of the God Suzaku, closed in on the swordmasters.

"Ruuuuuuuun!!"

As if in response to Haruyuki's scream, one of them got up. Graphite Edge. His black armor was cruelly cracked, but his twin diamond swords were unharmed. He didn't flee, but instead turned toward the spiral of flames, took a few steps forward, and thrust out the swords in both hands.

"Spinning Shield!"

Together with the call of the technique name, the two swords began to rotate at high speed, with the hilts at the center, almost like a pinwheel. This instantly became a shield of shining white light.

Dawhank! When the Flame Vortex came into contact with the light shield, it scattered over a wide range with a sharp sound. Haruyuki couldn't see Graph at all, but it seemed he'd held his ground and not gotten swallowed up by the flames. Haruyuki had thought Graphite Edge was completely specialized in attack, but the fact that he'd single-handedly defended against the attack launched by Tezcatlipoca after being freed from its restraints meant that his powers of defense were almost terrifyingly great. If the other five attackers got to their feet now and ran while the fire attack was interrupted, they might still escape.

In which case, this was no time for Haruyuki to simply sit and watch the battle play out. He had to fly again so that the hard fighting of his comrades wouldn't be for nothing. Fortunately, he had another pair of wings—angel wings, given to him by Metatron.

"Equip..."

He started to call out the command to summon the Enhanced Armament.

Blrp. And then he heard a viscous sound.

With its left hand still shooting fire, Tezcatlipoca launched a black sphere from its stomach. It wasn't an energy bullet; the slightly transparent ball flew through the air, wobbling unsteadily like a liquid with high relative density. Purple sparks snapped and crawled on the smooth surface.

He'd seen the exact same attack somewhere else before. During the mission to rescue Aqua Current from the east gate of the Castle...

Someone broke through the wall of flames produced by Graphite Edge's spinning swords from the inside. Charging toward the black lump of mucus was Cyan Pile—Takumu.

"Hngaaaaah!"

Takumu brought the Incarnate greatsword he held in both hands down with incredible speed. The blue shock wave blade split the sphere into two.

However.

The sphere fused back together as though nothing had happened and swallowed Cyan Pile with the same viscous *blrp*. The purple sparks crawling along the surface of the motionless mucus sphere writhed like a living creature. It was...*that* attack.

Level Drain. The vilest special attack in the Accelerated World, thought to be used only by the God Seiryu. At that moment, the burst points that Takumu had accumulated were being sucked away by the sphere.

"Aah...Aaaaaaaaah!" Haruyuki screamed and flailed wildly. Heedless of the further drop in his health gauge, he pulled away from the chunks of the roof that pierced his armor, eventually freeing his upper body with great effort.

The sphere enveloping Takumu sparked even more violently, and inside it, Cyan Pile dropped to his knees. Takumu's level had just fallen from six to five.

In the back of his mind, the conversation he and Takumu had once had in his living room came back to life.

"Let's make a promise. Someday, when we both make it to level seven, when

we join the high rankers, we fight one more time with everything we have, no holds barred. You've made it through so many trials, and you're gradually getting stronger. But I'm working hard to beat you next time with my own power. How about it, Haru?"

"Got it. It's a promise, Taku."

Haruyuki and Takumu had fought up until that very day with this promise in their hearts. Because Haruyuki had been the one to cut into the Sun God Inti, he had gotten to a place where he only needed a few more points to reach that level, including the extra points he'd need for a safe margin. Once the fight with the White Legion was over, the time would finally come to fulfill his promise with his best friend. That's what he'd thought.

"Stop...Stoooooooooooooop!" he shrieked, tears filling his eye lenses.

This cry drowned out the sound of the next big spark. Level five to level four.

Tezcatlipoca raised the right hand that had been pierced by Graphite Edge's Incarnate technique. Dull lumps of dark energy were lodged in the five fingers, instead of the palm. It was going to strike the final blow.

Intuitively understanding this, Haruyuki severed his left leg below the knee with a sword hand, since he couldn't pull it free from the rubble no matter how he tried. The pain was immense. His health gauge dropped another pixel.

He staggered up on one leg and focused his Incarnate light in his right hand once more. His overlay was unstable. And even if he attacked one more time, Tezcatlipoca would feel it about as much as a scratch from a thorn. Even so. Even so...

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt it not with his five senses but with his soul.

Watching. Being watched. Someone was staring at this tragedy from a higher dimensional space.

Instantly, he shifted his own consciousness to the Highest Level, reaccelerating without having to move at all.

The milky-white sky of the Sacred Ground stage changed to a transparent darkness. All the buildings were replaced with a cluster of white lights. Cyan Pile, Graphite Edge, Trilead Tetroxide, Centaurea Sentry, Lavender Downer, and Metatron had become twinkling stars of different colors.

And in the center of his field of view, a terrifyingly massive vortex of energy swirled, the likes of which he'd never seen on the Highest Level. Compared with this, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, was nothing more than a speck of stardust. This was a black hole to swallow everything.

"See? There's nothing to be done about a thing like this, hmm?"

He heard a voice from behind and looked back.

Standing there was White Cosmos, depicted in white light. Perhaps because this was her usual armor color, or usual air, she didn't seem much different on the Highest Level.

"You...Did you know this would happen?" Haruyuki asked slowly.

"No." Cosmos shook her head gently. "I thought they would attempt to get you back, but I didn't think you could destroy all six crowns at once—not when they're immune to physical attack, flame, corrosion. Tezcatlipoca was supposed to react exactly according to my program and capture you and the rescue team in the gravitational constraints and pin you to the ground until I arrived. But you all constantly surpass my expectations. You can take pride in that," she said, as if consoling him.

"Pride?!" he shouted back, clenching his hands into fists. "I— Because of my foolishness, I put my precious comrades in the absolute worst situation!"

He fell to his knees on invisible ground. Beaten and battered in the Unlimited

Neutral Field, Silver Crow was uninjured in this world, but he was unaware of this as he squeezed words out of his constricted throat. “If I’d just...If I’d just looked at Tezcatlipoca from the Highest Level...If I’d seen this, I would never have thought I could escape.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Lotus and your comrades would have carried out a rescue mission whatever you said, yes? That’s Nega Nebulus’s strength. And its weakness.”

“...”

He wanted to argue with her, but he didn’t have the strength left for that. Instead, he looked once more at the enormous black hole, still on his knees on the ground.

“Is this the end, then? Is it going to crush everyone and then keep going to destroy the Unlimited Neutral Field? I...pushed the end button. Is that it?” he whispered.

“The reason I was able to tame it was because I stepped into the first and final opening it had, in the middle of the activation sequence after it appeared from inside Inti,” the White King responded, her kindly voice even. “There won’t be another opportunity like that. However.”

“However?” He looked up at her.

“However, there is a possibility. Of all the Burst Linkers, I alone might be able to stop it one more time. Perhaps.”

“Why...you alone?”

“Because I was consumed by it a long, long time ago,” she said, her voice strangely calm.

Haruyuki couldn’t understand the meaning of these mysterious words and was about to ask what she meant, but then he realized he had a more important role there now. This was already the only thing he could do.

“Please, White King. Please stop it. Before it erases everyone.” He sat formally on his knees, pressed his hands to the ground, and entreated White Cosmos.

She cocked her head slightly to one side. “What advantage is there for me in

doing that? What kind of reason would I have for saving them when they're trying to eliminate Oscillatory Universe from the Accelerated World?"

"..."

Haruyuki clenched his hands and took two deep breaths. "I..." His throat threatened to close over, but he pushed the words out. "I'll transfer to Oscillatory Universe. I'll work as hard as I can for you. So...So."

It was all he could do to say that much.

The White King's elegant face mask showed no expression whatsoever as she pushed further. "You? You're telling me to throw away the chance to eliminate high rankers, including the Anomaly—and he might even be stronger than a king—to get ahold of *you*, when you're still a mere babe?"

"...Yes. That's all I have to offer you. Just my life and my loyalty."

"Mmm. Hmm." White Cosmos tilted her head back and fell into thought, while in front of her, Haruyuki moved to press his forehead to the ground.

But before he could, a new, cold voice echoed through space.

"I shall also move to the White Legion with Crow."

Haruyuki looked back to see the Archangel Metatron, wings on her back spread wide, her normally closed eyes now wide open.

"...?!"

He reflexively stood up and thrust both hands out at her. "Y-you can't, Metatron! You have to stay in Nega Nebulus! You have to keep everyone—keep *her* safe for me!"

"You...fool!!" the Archangel cried, particles of light—tears—spilling from her eyes. She raced over to him and whapped him on the shoulder with her fist before stretching that hand around to his back to pull him close. Her other hand held his head firmly and when she spoke again, her voice was anguished.

"I...Do you have any idea how lonely I was during these ten years I spent recuperating?! I do not wish to be apart from you any longer! If you go to the White Legion, then so shall I!"

“...Metatron.” It was all Haruyuki could do to say her name.

Earnestly pushing back whatever it was that threatened to spill from his chest, he turned his face and looked at the White King.

A slight, mysterious smile had come across Cosmos’s face mask as she looked at them. Her gentle voice broke the ongoing silence.

“I suppose.” She nodded slowly and her tone changed somewhat. “Silver Crow. Being Metatron. I will trade the lives of those five others for your move to my Legion. Crow, swear your loyalty.”

Haruyuki obediently pulled away from Metatron and took a step toward the White King.

I’m sorry, Kuroyukihime. He lowered his eyes and apologized to Kuroyukihime in his heart before kneeling.

When he put his hand on his left hip, Lucid Blade materialized there. With one hand on the guard, he unsheathed it and offered the hilt to his new king.

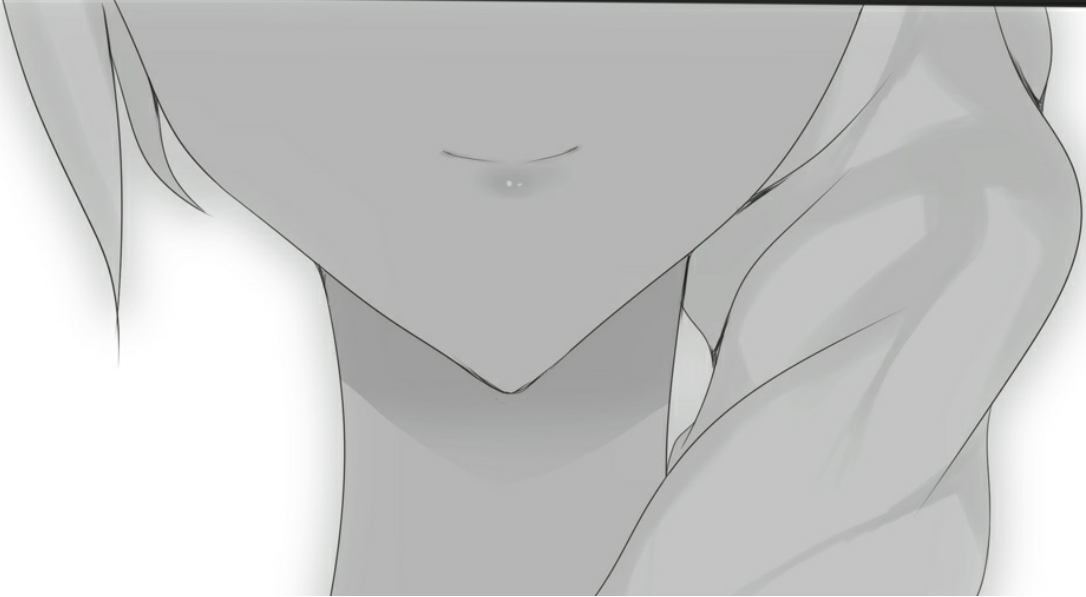
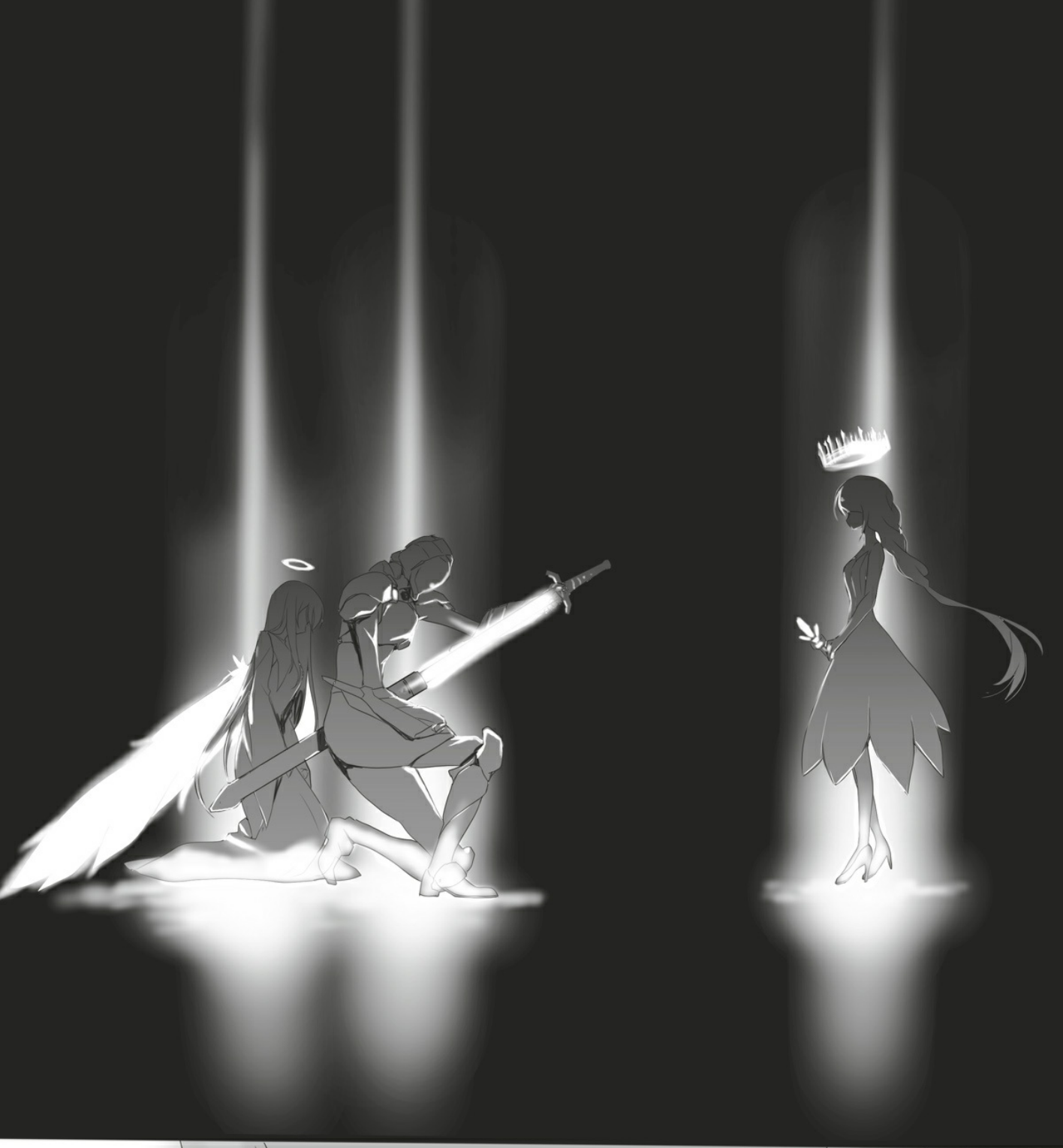
White Cosmos accepted the sword and tapped Silver Crow’s left shoulder with its tip. “From this moment on, you are my knight. You will obey only my orders and spend your life only for me.”

“Yes.” Haruyuki bowed his head deeply, and Metatron knelt beside him.

The White King thrust the sword into the ground. Lucid Blade stood up straight in the virtual space, and the slender pointed toes on the other side of it changed direction slightly.

When he looked up, the White King was staring at the swirling black hole with an unreadable expression on her face.

To be continued.



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Accel World 25: Deity of Demise*. Again, I made you wait an entire year after the previous volume. My gratitude is boundless to those of you who continue to follow this story despite this. Again, I say to you: Thank you so much!

(From here, I do go deeply into the details of this book, so please be careful if you haven't read it yet!)

With this volume, the long, ongoing White Legion arc ends for now, and the Seven Arcs storyline will begin in the next volume. Errr, the Incarnate System arc ended in Volume 16 and the White Legion story began in Volume 17, so it has taken nine volumes, then. I feel that Haruyuki and the others have really fought so hard! They fought hard, but in the very last moment, Big Sister was just a cut above and so it comes to this...But I do wonder if Cosmos will really be all right letting these two into her Legion! No matter where Haruyuki goes, he is still Haruyuki, after all.

I wrote this volume in the spring of 2020, and the writing environment—or rather all of society—was turned on its head, so I did have a fairly difficult time. To start with, I couldn't go to my main place of work—the family restaurant! Naturally, I have worked at home, but for twenty years, I've been writing in local family restaurants, so if we say that my writing has five gears, then I was in third once I was in my home. Not to mention the frequent stalling of the engine. Left with no other options, I tried to set up a workplace outside my house, but in the end, there was the same lack of a sense of being far enough away! This was the conclusion...Currently, the plan is for me to borrow a desk at the office of a straight-edge punk who does management for me, but as to whether or

not I'll be able to write in a situation where my editor is within my field of view...(sweats)

Before the coronavirus situation, my writing environment was a bit of an issue, and there was talk of where the entertainment industry and thus society as a whole was going. I think that everyday life won't be going back to pre-COVID times for the time being, or even ever, if we blunder too badly. In the sense of a measure to prevent infection, the full-dive technology does have a pleasant ring to it, so I'm simply praying that someone hurries to develop it. I'm sure that all of you are also currently living with a variety of stressors at the moment, so I'd be delighted if this book could be a momentary balm for your soul.

Given the situation, this volume made impressive progress to the Tezcatlipoca level. My sincerest thanks to my editors Miki and Adachi, and to HIMA, who continues to draw the illustrations with full Incarnate despite the leisurely pace of one book a year! All right, I'll see you in the next volume!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in June 2020

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